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by **J. T. McINTOSH**

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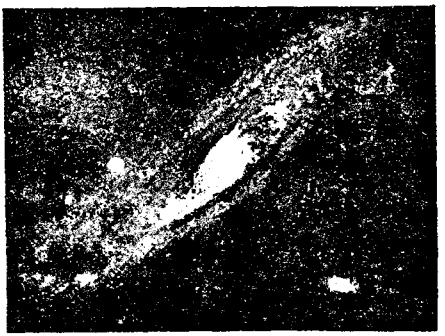

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GALAXY MAGAZINE is published bi-monthly by Galaxy Publishing Corporation. Main offices: 421 Hudson Street, New York 14, N. Y. 50c per copy. Subscription: (6 copies) $2.50 per year in the United States, Canada, Mexico, South and Central America and U. S. Possessions. Elsewhere $3.50. Second-class postage paid at New York, N. Y. Copyright, New York 1963, by Galaxy Publishing Corporation, Robert M. Guinn, President. All rights, including translations reserved. All material submitted must be accompanied by self-addressed stamped envelopes. The publisher assumes no responsibility for unsolicited material. All stories printed in this magazine are fiction, and any similarity between characters and actual persons is coincidental.

Printed in the U. S. A.
By The Guinn Co., Inc. N. Y.
Title Reg. U. S. Pat. Off.

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THE PAPER TIGER

When the New York City subway system purchased a modified and rather rudimentary computer and installed it in the cab of one of its subway trains, the operating union took an extremely dim view of it. They suspected that if this experiment worked it would be only a step to automating all transportation and thus to throwing the city's whole force of motormen and conductors out of work.

In this suspicion they were undoubtedly right. It's true that it seems likely it would be a rather long step, not to be taken in a hurry. After a year's experience with what Mike Quill calls "the Headless Horseman" and the subway officials term "the Automated Train" it seems pretty clear that there's a way still to go. The automated train was, to begin with, given the simplest job in the system — it shuttles back and forth from Times Square to Grand Central, never switching, never stopping except at the ends of the line. It is a job that an idiot could do pretty well, and in fact the Headless Horseman does it in about the style of an idiot . . . and a neurotic and heavy-handed idiot, at that. It bumps irresolutely to its terminal and, as soon as it realizes it is there, flies into a panic

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These great minds were Rosicrucians . . .

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Benjamin Franklin

Isaac Newton

Francis Bacon

Why were these men great?

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and jams on the brakes . . . while the standby human motorman scowls into a dark future with his hands in his pockets.

Why is the standby motorman there? To take over in case of emergency, says the union. To provide a means of testing and studying the equipment, says the company. But in fact he is there for only one reason — because if the subway system hadn't agreed to employ him there the employees would have gone out on strike, feeling, with much logic, that the time to deal with a threat is *before* it gets too big to handle.

Question is, how big is the threat going to get? And more important — when is it going to happen?

It is our opinion — admittedly backed by nothing much in the way of a guarantee, because we don't expect to be around long enough to be called on it — that the worst fears of the opponents of automation will never be realized because (a) the great disastrous upsurge in unemployment simply won't happen and (b) anyway, most of it has happened already! For the tendency to develop ways for two men to do what used to be ten men's work is not something that was invented with automation. It has been going on for something more than two hundred years. It began with the steam textile mills in England; it grew with the introduction of the cotton gin in the South. It came to a head a third of a century ago in what was then called "rationalization" — or sometimes, "the assembly line" — and indeed it did lead to serious stress, playing a part in the cause and prolongation of the Great Depression.

Automation is only a part of a larger process — the continuing growth of techniques to increase the productivity of the individual worker. Granted that this has over the last couple of centuries abolished tens of millions of jobs. Can you imagine anyone applying for *any* of those jobs today?

There are simply some jobs that are too boring, too arduous, too pointless for a human being to do. These are the jobs that automation is out to get, just as its predecessors have got the jobs of picking the seeds out of cotton bolls and running a loom with a foot-treadle.

If it hadn't been for previous similar developments, a lot of us would have been doing those jobs today. Those jobs are gone — so those of us who would have had them are, in a sense unemployed.

And frankly — we're doing pretty well out of it, aren't we?

—FREDERIK POHL

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GRANDMOTHER EARTH

BY J. T. McINTOSH

ILLUSTRATED BY FINLAY

Old Earth was dying, and neither courage nor strength could save it . . . but perhaps vanity could!

I

One after another the girls in bikinis and stripsuits on the beach at Cannes raised their heads and preened themselves as the tall, bronzed stranger strode past along the waterline. They could have saved themselves the trouble. He didn't even glance at them.

That he should be a stranger was in itself intriguing. There were scarcely any strangers any more. There were so few people left that everybody knew nearly everybody else.

The Americas, Asia, Australia and Africa were all empty, save for a few determined hermits. The Pyramids, Sydney Bridge, the Grand Canyon and Red Square no longer drew throngs of gaping, camera-clicking tour-

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ists — although they were all still there, only Sydney Bridge and Red Square showing signs of neglect. (The Grand Canyon and the Pyramids were neglected too, but they didn't show it.)

The Riviera being as good a place as any for a few score of thousands of people to live, winter and summer, with minimum effort and least danger from flood, fire, drought, pestilence, famine and wild animals, the population of Grandmother Earth had gradually collected there. California, Miami, Sydney, Biarritz and Algiers had held out for a while in the hope of winning the battle to be the last resort of a race dying of lethargy and apathy. One by one, however, they had put up the shutters.

Cannes beach, although undeniably part of a reservation for the aged, equally undeniably didn't look it. The really old couldn't summon up enough energy to go out any more. Only teens and twenties, and the few children, went to the immense trouble of prettying themselves and walking to the beach to sunbathe. And most of these were women.

When a race is dying, the average woman holds out longer than the average man.

When a man comes to the conclusion that there is no longer anything worth doing, he's dead. A woman lasts longer because to the end a certain desire for admiration remains. She keeps herself clean and firm and attractive after her male counterpart has surrendered to dirt and idleness and silent solitude. She seeks the company of her own sex, and at least the acknowledgment of the other sex, when a man can't be bothered going out. So she remains half alive when he is three-quarters dead.

Marcel was unaware of the interest he was kindling in a hundred golden-brown, scarcely covered breasts. He would not have cared had noticed it. He had other things on his mind.

Marcel was one of the last rebels. True, if he had lived a few centuries earlier, temperament unchanged, he would have been regarded as the most timid, indolent conformist. But in his world, in his time, he was a rebel. He wanted to live, when nearly everyone else was content to die.

He was in Cannes for a Council meeting that afternoon. He had cycled from San Remo, stopping overnight at Nice, for the distance was all of fifty miles. It was a long journey, but he preferred to cycle. Cars were becoming increasingly unreliable and there were no spares any

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more. Marcel had left one car in Genoa and another in Frejus, the two limits of present-day human habitation. Either might have been repaired in Nice or San Remo, but in Genoa and Frejus, the withering outposts of a shrinking community, they were so far from real civilization that they might as well have been in dead, empty Chicago.

Not many delegates would take the trouble to come, he reflected as he walked along the golden sand, the tideless Mediterranean throwing up wavelets at his feet. Of the Council of 100 he doubted if more than thirty would be present. Perhaps only twenty-five.

Well, the fewer there were, the fewer he'd have to convince. Something had to be done, and Marcel thought he knew what. Even if only twenty-five delegates turned up, the Council retained all its powers. Quorum provisions had gone long ago — it was seldom that any meeting of any committee achieved this technical competence.

In his mind he examined his proposal for flaws. He found none. It would work. And it was perhaps the only thing which would work. There was no point in thinking about it any more.

Released at last from his mood concentration, Marcel took notice of one of the girls sleepily sunbathing up by the promenade wall. She was a pretty blonde of perhaps fourteen, her brown body lightly censored by a blue stripsuit.

She smiled at him, frankly inviting, promising all there was to promise.

He crossed the ten yards of sand that separated them and sat beside her.

"Hi," she said. "I'm Roya. How come I've never seen you before?"

"I'm from San Remo. Marcel is the name."

"I've been in San Remo often, and I never saw you there." She seemed unable to get past the astonishment that such a man could exist, could have existed for all her life and perhaps seven or eight years more, quite unknown to her.

"I'm not often on the beach. I'm a carpenter. I make chairs, tables, cabinets, things like that."

"I guess somebody has to make them," she admitted. "But you must be on the beach sometimes. Where else did you get that tan?"

"The sun shines," Marcel retorted, "not only on the beach, not only on the seventy by two mile strip we live in, but over the mountains, across the sea and on other continents. I could acquire a tan eleven thousand miles from San Remo beach."

She stared. "You talk funny."

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"I suppose I do. Perhaps it comes of occasionally reading a book."

"You read books too? Looking like you do? You make tables and chairs and read books?"

He looked at her thoughtfully, wondering if behind her pretty face there was a mind capable of understanding important things, wondering whether she was trivial because she had never encountered anything but triviality.

"What would you expect me to do?" he asked quietly.

"I thought you were a lover."

"You flatter me not."

His tone was cold, but it failed to repress her. She giggled.

Even sex was too much trouble for a race which had lost its vitality. In the early stages of the decline, a century or two back, when it was steep but not precipitous, promiscuity such as Babylon and the French court had never dreamed of became the rule. It did not last. Conquests in which there was no contest ceased to divert. It became necessary to search for and invent new sensations, and soon there were none left.

Now the jaded survivors languorously chased not sex but pleasure in sex, some ghost of meaning in sex. Sex with issue was of course rare. Few women wanted children, few who wanted them were capable of bearing them, and few men could give them all the necessary assistance. Marriage was as dead as witchcraft. All that was left was a lazy longing in both sexes to be stirred, however briefly and unproductively, into a semblance of passion. Nobody expected it to happen often, or for long.

Certain comparatively lusty individuals of both sexes were much in demand as kindlers of passion. They could be amateurs, subtle or crude, powerful or frail, but they all had this in common: they offered life. Never had public opinion changed as drastically as in the way lovers were regarded. Once lovers would have been called gigolos, courtesans and worse. Now only odd people like Marcel were irritated to be thought to be no more than a lover.

"*I* want to be a lover," Roya said.

"You would."

She started telling him frankly about her qualifications. Although she did not claim to have had the great complete experience yet, she had come close, she said. It was the fault of the males that she had not done better. With Marcel she thought she...

"How old are you?" he asked abruptly.

"Fourteen."

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"You've plenty of time."

If you could achieve passion at twelve or with a partner of twelve, good luck to you. By the time you were fifteen that compartment of your life might be closed for ever.

Briefly interested in Roya, Marcel looked her over. Her blue stripsuit was a long ribbon which went round behind her neck, crossed her breasts and ran down in a narrow V to go up behind her and curve back round the hips to her abdomen again. It covered as much flesh as a bikini, but not the same flesh. Young girls wore stripsuits to show that they didn't sag — if they didn't sag.

"Want me to go home with you now?" he asked ungraciously.

"Why not? It's only half a mile."

He stood up. "In that case, let's forget it," he said. "I have to come back here anyway."

He strode on, unconscious of the fact that he, the rebel, the fighter, the energetic champion of lost causes, had just proved that he was very nearly as indolent as everybody else.

II

The Council meeting was held in the Majestic, on the promenade, formerly one of the leading hotels of Cannes. Marcel, a white coat over his trunks, arrived precisely as the meeting was due to start.

His eyes widened incredulously. There were not twenty-five delegates present. Not fifteen. Not even ten.

Apart from himself, one man and one woman were present.

They waited for five minutes, but no one else turned up. Then Dion, the senior member present, declared the Council in session.

The subject was the moribund state of human society on Earth (it usually was), and the purpose of the meeting was to consider ways and means of improving the situation.

Earth was dying, and knew it, but didn't like it.

Not unnaturally, the three delegates who had taken the trouble to come (Marcel from San Remo, Selba from Nice and Dion from half a block away) were the three who were not only the most concerned about the situation, but also the readiest to produce possible countermeasures.

Dion spoke first. An elderly, silver-haired man, just on the point of turning querulous, he addressed the meeting over the heads of Marcel and Selba as if the hall, formerly a ballroom, were packed with eager, attentive listeners.

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"The situation is grave," he said, as if they didn't know it. "The present population is roughly sixty thousand. But of this number, ten thousand are over seventy. In twenty years, if the present trend continues, the population will be fifty thousand. In another twenty, less than forty. I say again, the situation is grave. Extremely grave..."

Nobody argued with him.

He came presently to his main point "Yet we peopled the galaxy," he declared. "We blazed the way to the stars. On scores of far-off worlds, human settlements are thriving, growing, prospering. It is our sons and daughters who gave the galaxy life. Now Mother Earth has become Grandmother Earth. Our colonies are spawning new colonies, ever further out, further from home."

He suddenly looked directly at Marcel and Selba. "It is up to our children to help us," he said. "We gave of our best. It was our strongest, bravest, most eager men and women who voyaged on the starships. We have heard how they prospered. Now we need the help of our strong, lusty children. We need..."

He went on in this strain for some time. What started as an impassioned ringing appeal slowly dissolved into the hurt bitterness of an old man abandoned by his children, of Lear betrayed by his daughters. He had no positive suggestion. How the far-distant Terran colonies were to be told of Earth's need of their strength and lust for life was not mentioned. What exactly they were to do was not mentioned either. (Come back and recolonize the planet which had given them all birth? Or send some mystic talisman which would miraculously restore life to a dying world?)

In conclusion he held out his hands in pitiful appeal, and then sat down.

Selba, next in seniority, spoke next. She referred acidly to Naro, the President, who had not bothered to come and preside, although he lived only a mile or two away in Golfe Juan. Then she demolished Dion's vague complaints in a couple of sentences.

"The nearest colony is twenty-two years away," she said. "If Dion wants to go there and bring back a restoration team, I suggest he will have to spend the next forty-four years of his life doing it."

She paused significantly. Dion's age was uncertain; what was certain, however, was that he didn't have another forty-four years to live.

Selba was a tall, straight wom-

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an, once beautiful and still regally handsome. Now nearly fifty, she had grown out of the hot-headed certainty of youth into the cool, inflexible certainty of age. She had everything taped.

"If we go to the colonies," she said firmly, "it must be to join them, not beg from them."

Having made this brief opening statement she stood back, so to speak, to admire it.

"Women hold the key," she declared. "In every really important situation, women always hold the key. Now, most of us are sterile or barren — most of us of both sexes. There is no real reason for this, except that as a race we have lost the will to live. Yet if those of us who could have children had children, the population level would stabilize and even increase.

"Why don't women who could have children bear them? Partly because they fear childbirth. Partly because they shrink from the responsibility and sheer hard work of bringing up children. We must overcome both these things.

"As a closed community, we cannot do this. There is no competition. Women who refuse to face the responsibility of being women are permitted to persist in their refusal. What we need is a parallel community — a rival community, in which more blunt, brutal, vital rules of conduct apply. Where can we find such a community? Only in the colonies."

So her solution was for the Earth survivors to uproot themselves, every last one of them, and join one of the colonies. There was a three-quarters-finished ship, she said, somewhere in America. She understood it was near Philadelphia. It would be a small matter to finish it and evacuate Earth...

Marcel's turn came. Like Selba, he began by demolishing the previous speaker.

"Do you know what is done last on any huge technical project like building a starship?" he asked her directly.

She admitted she did not, contriving to suggest that the knowledge was not important.

"I'll tell you," Marcel said. "All the most difficult and complicated things. The things which demand the greatest skill and the greatest scientific knowledge. It would be easier by far to build a starship to 75 per cent completion than to do the rest."

Without a pause he demanded: "Do you know how many passengers such a ship could carry?"

"I imagine a great many—"

"Yes. A vast complement. Two

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hundred and eighty, plus crew. Three hundred twenty in all. And we have 60,000."

He waited. Selba waited too, hostilely.

"We can forget the colonies," Marcel said at last, "as they have forgotten us. We'll see colonists only if some settlement decides to send a ship here. And why should they? Nobody pays social calls that take forty-five to seventy years to complete. That's why we haven't seen a ship from and of the colonies since before the last outward-bound starship left here a hundred and fifty years ago—carrying the last of our adventurers. One day, when some of the colonies have finished building and have time to waste on things that don't matter very much, a shipload of archaeologists and anthropologists will arrive — but, the way things look now, by the time they do there will only be remains for them to argue over."

"It's not *right*," said Dion, almost to himself. "They should come and see us. We gave them birth."

"Sentimentality," said Selba coldly. "Why should they care? It's us that's in a desperate situation, not them."

"That's just it," Marcel observed. "We're *not* in a desperate situation. We couldn't be in an easier situation. We've picked one of the best all-the-year-round climates in the world. Fruit and crops grow so easily we scarcely have to do more than collect them, there's unlimited pasture for our cattle, and we have vast stocks of the things we can no longer be bothered to make, like textiles, ballpoint pens and plastic toilet-paper dispensers. Far from being desperate, we're in such an easy situation that we're all dying of sheer boredom."

There was sufficient truth in this for the others to let it pass, although they would have expressed it differently.

Marcel made his suggestion without hedging. "There used to be a border at Menton, between France and Italy. Let's close it! Let's create difference, hostility and distrust. It's our only way to survive."

Selba forgot for a moment to be acidly polite. She crowed with triumph.

"Marcel is young," she said. "Too young to remember that the plan he suggests was tried forty years ago — and was a miserable failure. Naturally! Because the solution is an artificial one. The conflict he wants is artificial. When the border was closed, people sailed past it in boats. They swam round the barriers. Seeing no sense in artificial, unnecessary prohibitions, they ignored them."

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There was silence. Marcel, disappointed, had to admit to himself that if the Council adopted his plan, the general public would probably do once more exactly what they had done forty years ago — ignore the closure. They wouldn't storm the barriers. That would be too much trouble, and somebody might get hurt. They would simply sail or swim past the barrier when they felt like it. That was no trouble at all.

There was still sense in his idea, but as Selba bluntly said, it was an artificial solution. Almost anything which might be tried suffered from the same flaw. There was no question of boredom when an individual or a community had to struggle desperately for survival. But it was no use *pretending* that a desperate situation existed when everyone could plainly see it did not.

In the silence they heard a strange but not quite unknown sound — the sound of aero engines.

III

The black raider swept in from across the Mediterranean, towing a large anti-gravity barge. Linked together by a steel towwire, the two vessels circled Cannes and then dropped rapidly to hover near the harbor.

Indolent as they were, the local inhabitants flocked to the spot. This was an incident completely out of the ordinary: although there were planes at Nice airport still allegedly capable of flight, only a few old men had ever piloted an aircraft and no younger people showed any particular inclination to learn.

The black plane must be from some other, unknown community. That such a group existed was not surprising. Tiny pockets of humanity were known to exist, or to have existed, in many places. That it should be at a level of achievement capable of operating planes was a surprise, and by no means an unpleasant one—

Until the machine-guns opened up.

No one was hit. The bursts of fire were evidently meant to contain the crowd which had already gathered. Isolated from the rest of the town by a fusillade, they crowded together fearfully with screams of horror, and no one who was not already there made any attempt to join them.

Marcel was among the hundreds who, on their way to join the crowd on the promenade, saw and heard what was going on and crept under cover.

The plane landed, the barge settling slowly behind it. Scores

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of black-suited men emerged. They spoke little. Their long black guns did all their talking for them.

Blind panic made some of the trapped herd try to run to safety. The black raiders shot over their heads. The warning was enough.

Silence fell again. The black raiders no longer had to shoot. The two or three hundred men and women huddled together in horrified apprehension had learned their lesson.

The raiders all wore black pants, black sweaters and grotesque gas masks. Those among the hundreds of prisoners who kept their heads saw the implications of the masks: The raiders were prepared to release tear or poison gas if they had to.

The anti-gravity barge reached the ground. Another dozen black-suited men jumped down.

And then the purpose of the raid emerged. The raiders went among their prisoners, threatening all of them but otherwise ignoring most of them.

Those they did not ignore were the youngest and prettiest women. These were sent to the barge.

There were more screams and several people fainted. Oddly enough, they saved themselves by fainting. The black raiders contemptuously ignored anyone who lapsed into unconsciousness.

The crowd consisted of those who were quickest on their feet and had been on the beach or promenade when the plans appeared. They were therefore the youngest inhabitants of the town, more than half of them children.

The raiders ignored girls who had not reached maturity. Those who had were chosen if they were attractive enough, no matter how young they were.

When they had screened the whole group, the raiders had forty-nine girls between twelve and twenty-five. All of them were in the barge and the doors were shut. But they could still be seen through the glass cover which enclosed the vessel, crying, beating the glass.

•

There was no move to rescue them. The people of Cannes, whether in the crowd on the promenade or watching from the surrounding buildings, had not forgotten the lesson of the machine-guns or the significance of the gas masks.

The raiders went back to the grounded plane and the door in its shiny black side slammed behind them.

None were in the barge with the women prisoners. None were needed, apparently. When the plane rose vertically into the air, the barge rose with it, operated by remote control.

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Those who remained on the promenade cowered as if expecting a blow. Many of them were. It seemed not unlikely that the black raiders, their booty safe, would now open up with murderous guns or drop lethal gas.

However, they did not. The black plane suddenly darted eastwards along the coast and was soon out of sight.

The people of Cannes, on the promenade or in the buildings overlooking it, blinked and frowned in surprise. The barge with the forty-nine girls in it had been left sixty feet up, motionless over the promenade.

Marcel emerged from cover and ran to the beach. All around him people were shouting, talking excitedly, looking up at the barge. He ignored them. The raiders would be back. Contemptuously they had left their booty in plain sight, out of reach.

Obviously the girls must be rescued. But how? Marcel gauged the distance — sixty feet, with black asphalt below. Jumping was out of the question.

The girls had a door open and were crowded behind it, looking down fearfully. There must be some way to rescue them...

The barge would stay at sixty feet, resisting any effort to pull it down. Could it be towed? Many of the buildings only a few hundred yards away had windows high enough for the girls to climb through, if the barge could be moved against them. But how to get a rope to the barge?

Marcel remembered having seen pictures of people jumping from burning buildings into sheets held by a dozen men. Would it work, without practice? Could the girls be persuaded to jump?

Easier still, surely much easier, was to get a rope to the barge. A rope could haul up a rope ladder. Failing that, surely the girls were desperate enough to climb down a rope?

A thin cord could haul up a rope. Was it possible to throw a weight attached to a cord sixty feet in the air? It ought to be— and yet, judging the distance again, he knew he couldn't do it himself. Sixty feet was only an estimate. It might be more. And the girls couldn't lean more than a foot or so beyond the door. It would be necessary for the thrower to stand back and throw the weight into the doorway. That would entail a throw of more like a hundred and twenty feet.

Some of the men standing around were already trying experimental casts with small objects they had in their pockets. None of them managed to reach the barge.

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But there had to be a way. Haul a cart with a bale of hay below the barge? That might work, but the raiders would not be gone long. Contemptuous as they might be of the courage and resource of the people of Cannes, they must be aware that in a couple of hours, even an hour, some way of rescuing the women must be found. Whatever they had to do, whatever sent them racing along the coast toward Nice and Monte, would not occupy them more than half an hour at most.

Ordinary ladders were useless. You couldn't jump from or to the top of a ladder. And from the top of a swaying ladder it wasn't easy to throw a rope hard and accurately.

Marcel thought of harpoons and spring guns, only to abandon the line of thought. You might unearth a harpoon in working condition in a couple of days. Not in ten minutes.

Couldn't the girls make a rope out of their clothes? After another glance up at them he abandoned that idea too. Most of them wore bikinis and stripsuits. The skirts, shorts and blouses which a few of them wore were too brief and fragile to supply more than a few feet of rope ladder in total. And the raiders would not have left anything useful in the barge.

"The fire station!" he suddenly shouted. "Where's the fire station?"

Most of the people around him stared blankly, but some caught on at once. A dozen men started to run up into the town. Marcel went with them.

The fire station was closed, derelict. Nobody still alive had any fire-fighting training. The ordinary citizen knew better than to start fires and let them get out of hand — there would be no organized rescue work, and everybody knew it. Such fires as did occur were left to burn themselves out. They were rare, for no building had been built for centuries of materials which would burn easily.

In the first bay stood two dead fire engines, rusting and rotten. They had ladders which would still reach sixty feet and more, and although the motors would never run again, the vehicles could be pushed.

But the ladders were power-operated and there was no way to raise them by hand.

As Marcel was examining the fire engines, a shout came from deeper in the station. Someone had found an older fire engine, even rustier and more rotten, but with a ladder which could be raised by hand.

It took twenty of them to push it out. The steering wheel was

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jammed, but the front wheels could be kicked into position when the fire-wagon had to be turned.

They manhandled it under the barge and turned the handles.

The metal ladder was rusted into a short, solid mass. One of the handles broke under the strain six men were putting on it.

Marcel seized an ancient axe and jumped up on the engine. He tapped the ladder and the rust gave, inch by inch. Others were smearing butter on the moving parts. The ladder crept upwards.

When it reached the door in the side of the barge a cheer went up. Then there was sudden silence. The onlookers, hundreds of them now, were drawing breath for the next cheer, the one that would greet the sight of the first girl climbing down the ladder.

It didn't come. The girls crowded in the doorway sixty feet up were looking at the ancient, black, swaying ladder with distrust. They were less scared to remain where they were than to entrust themselves to the ladder.

"Look—they're coming back!" Marcel shouted.

The girls didn't look to check. A fifteen-year-old girl in a white bikini was first on the ladder. That was enough to start the rush. The women in the barge who ten seconds before had been hanging back doubtfully were fighting to be next to descend.

Quick as they were, it took a surprisingly long time for forty-nine women to climb down a sixty-foot ladder. Many anxious glances were cast along the coast before the last girl reached the promenade.

The last girl was Roya. Marcel pulled her off the fire escape and dragged her away from the promenade. Now that the girls were safe, no one was anxious to remain. They all knew the black raiders would be back.

The ancient fire engine was left where it stood.

When the plane came back ten minutes later there wasn't a living creature to be seen in any street in Cannes.

The plane buzzed angrily round the empty barge. Then it started machine-gunning the streets. Hundreds of windows were broken and a few small fires were started. Several people who had stood too close to a window were injured by flying glass.

The raiders did not, however, land again. They knew that this time they would be met by no welcoming crowd. To rout out the women they had lost they would have to search every building in Cannes, risking any

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counter-measures that might have been taken against them.

At last they turned and flew out over the Mediterranean, taking the empty barge with them.

IV

"It was terrible," Roya said. "I've never been so terrified in my life."

"Of what, precisely?" Marcel enquired curiously.

Apparently Roya didn't know, and that made it worse.

"You're not very sympathetic," she protested.

"Oh, but I am," said Marcel. "If I seem to be smiling, it's just a trick of the sun and the peculiar shape of my face."

"There's nothing to smile about!" Roya said warmly. "The raiders machine-gunned half a dozen places and dropped tear gas in Monte. What's funny about that? It's a wonder nobody was killed."

"Nevertheless," Marcel said comfortably, "nobody was."

Privately he was convinced that the raiders' object had been to frighten the Rivierans, not to murder them. They had shown themselves all along the inhabited coast, not relying on telephone communication to spread the word of their coming. Yet at each place they had fired wide first, shooting up the streets only when they had given the local populace plenty of time to get under cover.

This was no more than the first act of a long play, and the tension would rise. What the climax would be Marcel had no idea, but he was sure there was much more to come before a crisis was reached.

And he was secretly delighted. Although he had helped to frustrate the black raiders, wasn't their sudden appearance exactly what he and Selba and even Dion wanted? The Council of 100, differing on details, had agreed for a long time that what was needed to infuse life into the dying community was conflict, different aims and interests strongly and stubbornly held. The mere existence of the black raiders might be exactly what was required to galvanize the Rivierans into new life.

"You seem to be taking it very calmly," Roya complained.

"Inwardly I'm shaking," Marcel assured her.

The black raiders would be back. The Riviera community must take defense measures. Before returning to the Majestic, Marcel wanted to have some ideas to put before the Council.

"What's that shouting?" Roya said suddenly.

They were both instantly alert. An hour before, there had been

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nothing to fear. Now everyone held himself ready for instant flight.

The crowd gathering near the harbor, however, seemed to see no reason for flight. Since the crowd was forming just outside the harbormaster's office, it was more than likely that the stir was caused by some fresh item of news that had come in by telephone. Whatever had happened had happened somewhere else.

"I'll go and find out what it's all about," said Roya, jumping up. Marcel was content to let her. The Council, still in session, might at that moment be discussing the raiders, and Marcel still had no contribution to make.

Guns. They'd have to look for guns, ammunition, bombs. When the raiders came back there would have to be some kind of resistance. At least enough to make them cautious.

Suppose there really was fighting, what would it be like? What was war like? Marcel had read books and seen old movies. But he couldn't imagine scores, perhaps hundreds of people implacably determined to kill or be killed.

He experienced strange sensations in his body. His chest was tight, his belly uneasy. There was a rushing sound in his ears. He recognized excitement and welcomed it. He even welcomed fear. When fear was present there was no boredom, no apathy.

That day marked a turning-point in human history. Things would never be the same again!

Roya came running back. "It was all a game," she said, laughing in breathless relief.

"A game?"

"A trick, a stunt. The black plane just landed at Alassio. The engine failed out at sea and it had to limp back to the coast."

"But..." Marcel's thoughts were chaotic. A trick? A game?

"Naro was behind it. Imagine it, Naro, the President of the Council! It was just a trick to make us think we had enemies."

"Naro?" said Marcel blankly.

"Yes, Naro. The real reason the raiders wore gas masks was so that we wouldn't recognize them. When they left us in the barge, you were *meant* to get us out. Imagine that! Of course, when the engine failed—"

"Where did Naro get the plane?" Marcel demanded.

"In a shed near Genoa. As I was saying, when the engine failed over the sea they had no choice but to land where they could. And they had to admit the whole thing. They had to surrender and explain who they were."

Roya had more to say, much more. For her the news was un-

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alloyed relief. She wasn't angry over what had happened, she was merely glad that the black raiders didn't represent a danger after all. That nothing represented a danger. That the world (or at least the narrow strip of coast she knew) was as safe a place as she had believed for all of her fourteen years.

The general reaction would be very like Roya's. No great harm had been done. The whole black raider affair had been a stunt, no more. It would be too much trouble to figure out a just and fitting punishment for the raiders. The easiest thing to do would be to laugh the incident off, treat it as a joke.

And the easiest thing to do was always the thing that was done.

Marcel heard no more. He forgot Roya and wandered blindly away, bitterly disappointed.

Selba was right, damn her. Artificial solutions were no use. Pretense was no use. A threat might save the Rivierans — but it had to be a *real* threat.

The trouble was, whatever was done had to be done from outside the small community that was Earth's last civilization. And there was nobody outside to do it.

It was because of the abortive incident of the black raiders that when the *Mercury* arrived over Cannes the next day, nobody believed her arrival represented anything very important, but nobody took any chances. Almost certainly this was another trick, another fake, another stunt. Nevertheless, real shells had peppered Cannes the previous day, and somebody might have died.

From under cover, the population of Cannes waited cautiously to see what happened.

V

Tom Piggott turned the wheel of the magnifying screen to its fullest extent. The docks of Marseilles rushed up at him. Then, as he cut in the power-operated fix mechanism, he was able to scan parks and sidewalks from an apparent height of twenty feet, the viewer swiveling to keep a succession of fixed points on the screen although the ship was making five hundred knots at fifteen thousand feet.

The view was good, there being little or no haze and no cloud. But there was nothing much to see, certainly nothing that Piggott was looking for. Here and there buildings had collapsed, blocking streets from side to side. Parks and green spaces had become jungle. In some places the jungle pockets were driving salients into the dead concrete world that tried to contain them.

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"Want me to ease up so you can take a closer look?" the pilot said. "Want me to drop to a few hundred feet?"

"You needn't bother," Tom said. "There's nobody there."

"But you still think there are people left somewhere? Though we've checked Lisbon, Madrid, Barcelona and not seen as much as a dead body?"

"That's just it," Tom said. "There's no bodies in the streets and no sign of destruction, except through the natural erosion of time. So we can take it there's been no pestilence and no war. The people of these cities haven't been struck down suddenly. They've migrated."

"Where to?"

"Well, on this continent they'd go to the Riviera or Southern Italy or Greece, I'd say. Warm but not too hot. It's not surprising there aren't many of them left. A hundred and fifty years ago the population was already drawing into pockets in the best climates — New Zealand, California, Miami, the Riviera."

"The names mean nothing to me," said the pilot.

"You should read." He sighed and spun the wheel back, switching off the fix mechanism. The screen now showed a moving picture shot from five hundred feet up. Tom did not watch it continuously; the rapid movement would give him eyestrain.

"Hurry on to Cannes and I'll take another look," he said.

"Sure, boss," said the pilot.

"I guess it would make sense to recolonize Earth," Tom mused. "It needs it. It needs it so bad I can't see the Terrans raising any objections . . . assuming there still are any left to object to the idea."

Although he was merely thinking aloud, the pilot elected to answer. "You're forgetting the eighth settlement law. Nobody can move in once a planet's on the 'developed' list."

"But that law was intended to protect expanding settlements," Tom objected. "It's taken for granted that any colony past the initial hardships will be growing like a forest fire. It wasn't meant to apply to worlds where the population is dwindling."

"It's still the law. And by the time it's changed and colonists can come here, another century will have passed."

There was no need to comment on this. If there *were* Terrans left, there couldn't be many. Could they last another century? Could they wait a hundred years for a blood transfusion?

Tom spun the wheel and cut in the fix mechanism again. Almost at once he let out a yell: "This is it! There's people down there!"

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Less than ten minutes later the news ship *Mercury* landed beside Cannes harbor.

Tom came out alone, looking around him in surprise. From the air he had seen scores, perhaps hundreds of people. Now there were none. Cannes looked as empty and deserted as Lisbon and Madrid and Barcelona.

But it wasn't. One or two bicycles stood around, clean and obviously in current use. The boats in the harbor were seaworthy, riding high. The litter lying around was new litter. Most significant of all, a paper cup full of ice cream, dropped on its side on the hot asphalt, was only beginning to disgorge its contents in a slow, creamy stream.

Tom faced the blank windows. "Come on out!" he shouted, feelfoolish. "We're friends. Anyway, there's only two of us."

Nothing happened, though now he caught glimpses of faces in upstairs windows. When he stared at any particular window, the faces disappeared.

Fear of infection — that might be it. They were afraid that he had brought with him some plague harmless to him but deadly to them. They needn't worry. He told them so, feeling even more foolish, shouting explanations at silent buildings.

The hell with it, he said to himself, spinning on his heels. The pilot looked up sardonically as he entered the *Mercury*'s control room. "White man speak with lungs of brass. Indians wait in bullrushes, laughing selves silly."

"Okay, so now you can see what you can do," Tom retorted. "They're timid, that's all. But they'd hardly be scared of *you*."

The pilot stood up. "You don't think so?"

"No. But if you go the way you are, the point may be lost."

The pilot looked down at her shapeless overalls and evidently saw what he meant, for she unzipped them and stripped them off. Then she took off her cap and shook out her hair.

The point was no longer in any danger of being lost. Her sweater and shorts were utilitarian, not primarily decorative. However, there was no doubt that she was a girl and unarmed.

"I go," she announced, "bravely and without complaint. Have my medal sent to my mother."

"There's no danger. They're scared of us, I tell you."

When Stella emerged into the sunshine, the Terrans remained hidden. However, Tom's reasoning was sound. A lone girl obviously unarmed represented no great danger.

After Stella had wandered a couple of hundred yards from

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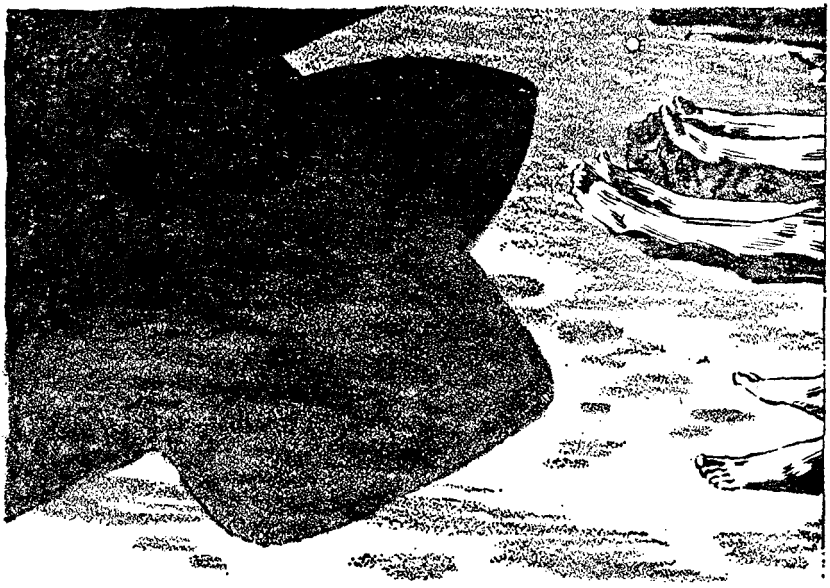

the ship, Marcel, who had been watching cautiously from the shadows between two buildings, stepped out and faced her.

"Hello," he said, and then with more enthusiasm as he got a good look at her, *"hello!"*

This time there were over ninety members present. There hadn't been such a turnout at a Council meeting for over a century. Dion presided; Naro thought it prudent to stay quietly at home for the time being. On Dion's left was Stella, on his right Tom.

Tom had the floor. He was explaining what the *Mercury* was, who he and Stella were and what they were doing on Earth.

And already the Council was bitterly disappointed. From the very beginning Tom made it clear that his visit was unofficial and not the forerunner of a larger-scale colonial expedition to Earth, that its object was not in any sense to render assistance to the Terrans, that Earth was only one of twenty worlds to be visited and that he and Stella would remain for only three days.

Most of the Council members were old. Many of them, like Dion, felt that the colonies ought to be far more interested in the world which had given them birth, ought to visit Earth far

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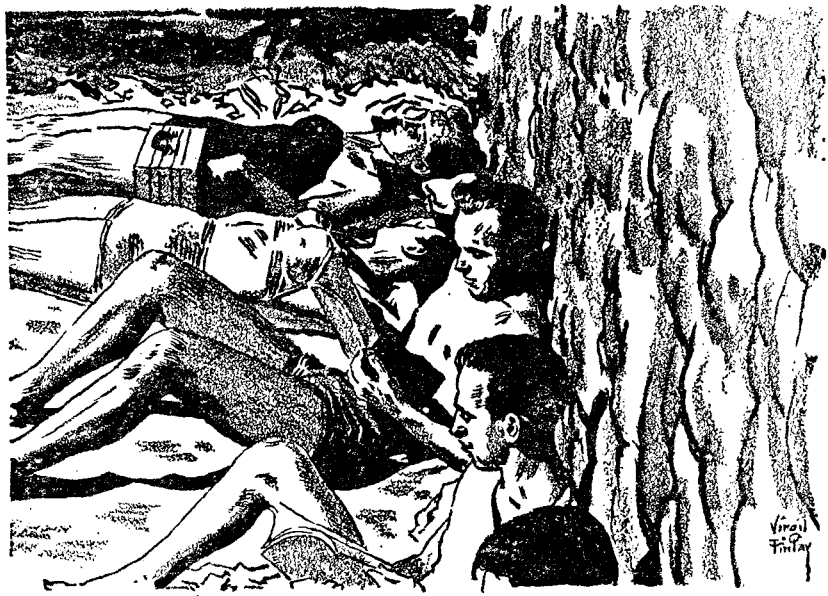

more frequently, and ought to be gravely concerned over Earth's problems. Briefly excited when they learned the *Mercury* was from the colonies, these members now slumped into gloom, scarcely listening.

Others, like Marcel and Selba, were still listening intently, alert for anything that could be turned to account. The *Mercury,* was, after all, from the colonies. More than that, it would be back there within a few weeks, if what Tom Piggott was saying could be believed.

What message was the *Mercury* going to take back? What message did the Terrans want her to take back?

"Some of you will be wondering how we managed to come here at all," Tom was saying. "As you can see we're both in our twenties. And we've already traveled over eighty light-years..."

Nobody was particularly interested in his description of the principle of the *Mercury*. Technical matters had long ago become too much trouble to try to understand. Keeping the water and electricity supplies going was about the limit of present-day technical achievement.

Marcel gathered vaguely that the ship was a time machine and suspended animation tank as well as a vehicle. The ship itself

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had to go every inch of the way, taking many years to do so. But it was possible to play tricks with time if not with distance, provided the crew did not consist of more than two or three people. (Another disappointment. A twenty-five-year journey still took twenty-five years if more than three people had to travel.) The *Mercury* and her crew, the latter in suspended animation, took many years over the various hops — but since the journey was accomplished in a kind of time vacuum, a hundred-year round trip could be completed in an apparent period of weeks.

"No mission like ours would ever be possible without such a technique," Tom said. "Radio's no good in the galaxy. Until now, space travel was too slow to be used for anything less than settlement. It's not worth spending fifty years in space, even in suspended animation, merely to find something out. So there's been little or no communication between distant settlements. But this way, some of our big news agencies figured it was worth financing a galactic news round-up. Stella and I are visiting Sherbourne, Centauri, Sirius, Medoc and Sol, catching up on the news of the last century or so."

So it was just another stunt. Well, what else? The *Mercury* would take back to the colonies the interesting information that Earth was nearly dead. And that was all it would be, interesting information.

Marcel ceased listening to Tom, as many of the others had done already. He looked instead at Stella.

Stella had hit Marcel like a thunderbolt. Tom was energetic, efficient, businesslike; Stella was all these things and something more. Tom's vitality did not startle Marcel. Stella's did.

Stella, Marcel had decided in that first moment, represented his personal future. What he wanted of her was more than sex, more than marriage, more than children. He needed her as a man dying of thirst needs water. He needed her and his race needed her.

(In the next few days, Tom was saying, he and Stella and the Terrans would exchange information. Stella would take a record of all the events of the last century and a half on Earth, while he brought the Terrans up to date on what had happened in the galaxy in that time.)

Marcel, and through him his people, needed Stella so desperately that she could not be allowed, could not be given any opportunity to refuse. You don't ask for what you *need*. You take it.

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Quietly, unobtrusively, Marcel slipped out of the ballroom.

VI

Stella had wanted to sleep on the ship, but Tom said that was no way to win the confidence of the Rivierans. So they had two rooms in one of the ex-hotels near the harbor. Two rooms, and not adjoining at that.

It wasn't very late when Stella got to her room. The Terrans seemed to need, or fancied they needed, twelve hours' sleep at nights. And they didn't get up with the dawn.

"Good night," Stella said firmly outside her room.

Tom grinned. "On several other worlds I would have argued," he observed. "On several other worlds I *have* argued. On this one, the state of your virtue doesn't interest me."

"In other words," said Stella, "the natives are friendly. Got one waiting for you now?"

"Yes. Roya."

"Thought she was Marcel's girl friend?"

"She wanted to be before I turned up."

"Don't you find her too insipid for words?"

"There aren't going to be any words."

"Good night, then," said Stella tolerantly.

"Don't worry," Tom said. "It will be."

Entering her room, Stella switched on the light. She was not greatly surprised when nothing happened. In the few hours she had been with the Rivierans she had formed a fair idea of the situation on Earth, and she already knew that though the electricity supply was good and reasonably reliable, all electrical fittings were over fifty years old and it was common to have to test one component after another before light or heat could be obtained.

Since she was tired and the moonlight from the uncurtained window was adequate, she didn't propose to bother. She moved to the bed, unclasping her belt.

From behind, an arm went round her. A soft pad was held over her mouth.

She struggled violently, but in the first moment of shock she had drawn a deep breath through the cloth. Her movements, despite herself, became slower and feebler and more purposeless.

When she awoke she was in a vehicle of some sort, roaring and bumping over a rough road. She sat up at once.

"What the devil is going on?" she demanded.

Marcel stopped the car and switched off the engine. "We'd better do some talking," he said.

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He switched off the lights too to save the battery.

"Oh, it's you." She recognized him easily enough. They were on an open road in bright moonlight. There was no sign or sound of the sea.

"Yes. We're about fifty miles from Cannes — that's forty miles from the nearest human habitation."

"And what," she demanded hotly, "is the idea?"

"I just want to make sure that when the *Mercury* leaves, you won't be on it. I think I've made sure of that already, for the car's practically out of gas and it won't be easy to find any more. I'm sorry I had to kidnap you, but I had to be certain—"

Before he could stop her she was out of the car and running back the way they had come.

Marcel, taken aback, did nothing at all for several seconds. He had assumed that there would be a great deal more discussion before any action was taken — possibly acrimonious discussion, but still discussion. The way Stella made up her mind and acted took him by surprise. She had heard him say that they were forty miles from the nearest habitation. She didn't intend to attempt forty miles on foot, did she?

Presently he turned the car and drove back. Within a few minutes he caught up with Stella, who had stopped running. When he drew in beside her, however, she took to the wasteland at the side of the road, running once more.

"Stop!" Marcel shouted. "Stop and we'll talk it over."

Already the girl was almost out of sight.

Marcel got out of the car and ran after her. He was angry and baffled. She hadn't even tried to discuss the matter with him, hadn't bothered to ask him to drive her back to Cannes. It was as if she regarded him as insane — not dangerous, not important, just a harmless, slightly irritating lunatic.

Well, he'd catch her and *make* her discuss the matter.

Catching her wasn't so easy. Once or twice he came close, and then she pulled away from him again. Soon he realized that he had already lost his chance of catching her. In the first few minutes he might have done so by expending all his energy. But Stella's stamina was greater than his.

She might let him come close, seeing no need to waste her energy. She had no intention of letting him catch her.

The next time he came close enough, Marcel gasped: "All right, I'll take you back."

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She stopped and turned, watching him warily from fifteen yards' distance.

"If," Marcel went on, "you talk things over first."

"There's nothing to talk over," she retorted. "I'm going back to Cannes. Don't think I can't find it. I'll find the sea and work my way along it. Tom will wait for me, even if it takes me a year. He has to."

"Has to?"

"What sort of reception do you think he'd get if he went home without me?"

Marcel hadn't considered that. Now that she mentioned it, it was obviously something he should have considered. His plan had been based on Tom's firm declaration that the *Mercury* would remain only three days on Earth. Marcel had thought, rather ingenuously, that if he kept Stella out of the way for three days Tom would leave without her.

"All right," he sighed. "We'll go back."

She came a little nearer. "I don't blame you for trying," she said, not unkindly, "even though it lets me in for a long walk. What is it, do I inflame you with passion or something?"

"That too," he sighed. "But it's more than that, and I wasn't just thinking of myself. We need your spirit."

She looked at him with pity. "I know you do. But you can't get it by taking it — any more than a cannibal can acquire bravery by eating his enemy's heart. You can only get it by having it."

"With you, I'd be a different man."

"Don't delude yourself. Tom's having a party right now with Roya. He's satisfied. If a man really is a man, he doesn't need a woman to give him backbone. If he isn't, she can't anyway."

Marcel tried not to be convinced, but the fact that Tom was satisfied with Roya was hard to get around.

Stella came closer still. "Don't try anything else," she warned. "Anyway, you were wasting your time."

"What do you mean?"

"That if it came to a fight, I'd win."

"I'm stronger than you."

She shrugged. "Want a demonstration? We both know what you want. Take it."

When he touched her, she caught his wrist and the next moment he found himself on his back.

"Try again," she invited coolly.

He said, "No, I'm convinced." He was more than convinced. He was hurt.

They didn't have to walk after all. The car took them to the

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nearest village before running out of gas, and there Stella, not Marcel, found more. He would have been content to sniff around a filling-station and give up if no fuel was readily obtainable. She found her way down to the underground tanks and bored a hole in the bottom of one of them.

Marcel didn't try anything else. The fact that Tom spent all his spare time with Roya filled Marcel with gloom, not because he was jealous but because this seemed to prove that the fault lay in him, not Roya, that Stella was right when she said that no woman could give a man backbone.

Just before they left for the next world on their list, Tom and Stella talked to Dion, Marcel, Selba and Roya in the ship.

"You've certainly got some kind of a fixation, you people," Tom said. "I've only seen one worse case."

"Fixation?" Marcel queried.

"About being old and finished. About being the cradle of the galaxy and being abandoned by your ungrateful children and all that."

"That's not a fixation," said Dion sadly. "It's true."

"Nuts," said Tom rudely. "Didn't we tell you about Aidan? Maybe we didn't, at that."

"What's Aidan?" Marcel asked.

"A planet. Not an important world. Like Earth, only more so. All anybody can say about Aidan is 'Who cares?' "

They didn't know what he meant, and said so.

"Well, what does it matter where people come from, anyway? I was born on a world called Pradis, and because it's cold I like hot worlds. I like this one. At least, I like this bit of this one. I don't owe Pradis any debt. Who cares whether I ever go back there or not? You people have some cockeyed ideas... Why should anyone come back here, anyway?"

"Because this is the mother world," said Dion patiently.

"Didn't I tell you about Aidan?"

"No, you didn't," said Stella, taking a hand. "Aidan's a world just like this. The few thousand people there think the whole galaxy should honor her because the human race evolved there."

"But they didn't," Selba said coldly. "Earth is the mother world."

"Can't be," Tom said definitely. "Your history only goes back about twenty thousand years. Aidan's creative period was about ninety thousand years ago. I don't know whether Aidan colonized this world directly or indirectly, but there's no doubt

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at all that they're older than you."

"And they show it," Stella remarked. "You're old, but the people of Aidan are senile."

"Older than us?" said Dion, puzzled.

"Much older. They keep threatening to die out, as if the whole galaxy would collapse if they did. But they don't manage to die out, because every few centuries they become too lazy to practice birth control any more."

"This is a lie," said Selba icily. "For reasons of your own, you've invented a world called Aidan."

"To justify yourselves in refusing to help us," said Dion. "It's only to be expected. Young worlds have no time for the old."

Tom protested laughingly. "Give me one good reason why we should invent a planet that doesn't exist."

"I've given you it," Dion retorted. "To justify yourselves in refusing to help us."

"What justifies you in refusing to help Aidan?"

They blinked at him. "We can't," Selba said, "and anyway. . ."

She stopped.

"And anyway, why should you?" Tom said easily. "Of course. Who cares about Aidan anyway?"

"It's a lie," Selba said. "All a lie."

"Wait a minute," Marcel said slowly. "Aidan. We've never heard of it, have we? What about Eden? Maybe there's something in this story after all."

VII

When the *Mercury* had left, the Rivierans found some further information about Aidan, but not much, among the data Tom Piggott had left.

Apparently there was such a world. And it claimed to be the cradle of the human race. And nobody cared. . .

At the next Council meeting a new rule was passed — any member who missed three meetings running without an excuse would be suspended.

A labor force was organized to renovate the public service undertakings like electricity, water and sewage. First in Cannes, then San Remo, then Monte, then Nice.

The first issue for five years of the *Riviera Times* came out. This one was made necessary by the quantity and vehemence of things which had to be said about the visit of the *Mercury* and all that came out of it.

The sober editorial simply pointed out that if the rest of the galaxy believed Aidan was the birthplace of the human race, and didn't care, Earth

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could not expect much attention now or in the future.

And already there were many signs that Earth might not need charity after all. Well, it was a bit ridiculous, wasn't it, to be complaining of your age when your mother was still alive. Especially when *she* spent so much time complaining...

Naro's son set up a still and began making whisky. Some said this was a retrograde step. But as the alcohol consumption went up, so did the number of births. The two things might not, of course, be connected.

Crime went up, and this was certainly a retrograde step. However, it could no longer be said that nobody cared about anything. People cared a great deal about a great many things. Marcel nearly landed in serious trouble himself after a fight over Roya. The child she was going to have was *his*, not Tom Piggott's. The man who said otherwise very nearly died for saying it.

A scheme was afoot to sail across the Atlantic and colonize the New World. While this was agreed to be a trifle ambitious as yet, the plan found general favor. There was an urge in all communities to colonize... Earth might not be ready yet to rejoin the mad rush to colonize the galaxy; but at least she could colonize Earth.

Just after the *Mercury* was clear of Earth's atmosphere and before they took to the suspended-animation tanks, Stella said: "I don't think it's going to work."

"Sure it's going to work," said Tom confidently. "Leave it to your Uncle Tom. I may as well be your uncle — there doesn't seem much chance of any other relationship."

"You should worry. After practically a honeymoon with your Terran popsy."

"Anyway, it's certainly going to work. You can't wallow in your great age if you know there's someone older than you."

"But there isn't. We invented Aidan. It's another artificial solution to their self-imposed problem. Just another, like the scores of others they've been trying unsuccessfully for years."

"Artificial maybe," said Tom complacently, "but the point is it's an *outside* solution. You can't raise yourself by your own bootstraps — *but somebody else can!*"

— J. T. McINTOSH

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A BAD DAY FOR VERMIN

BY KEITH LAUMER

They came in friendship and love. They couldn't help the way they looked!

Judge Carter Gates of the Third Circuit Court finished his chicken salad on whole wheat, thoughtfully crumpled the waxed paper bag and turned to drop it in the waste basket behind his chair — and sat transfixed.

Through his second-floor office window, he saw a forty-foot flower-petal shape of pale turquoise settling gently between the well-tended petunia beds on the court-house lawn. On the upper, or stem end of the vessel, a translucent pink panel popped up and a slender, graceful form not unlike a large violet caterpillar undulated into view.

Judge Gates whirled to the telephone. Half an hour later, he put it to the officials gathered with him in a tight group on the lawn.

"Boys, this thing is intelligent; any fool can see that. It's putting together what my boy assures me is some kind of talking machine, and any minute now it's going to start communicating. It's been twenty minutes since I notified Washington on this thing. It won't be long before somebody back there decides this

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is top secret and slaps a freeze on us here that will make the Manhattan Project look like a publicity campaign. Now, I say this is the biggest thing that ever happened to Plum County — but if we don't aim to be put right out of the picture, we'd better move fast."

"What you got in mind, Jedge?"

"I propose we hold an open hearing right here in the courthouse, the minute that thing gets its gear to working. We'll put it on the air — Tom Clembers from the radio station's already stringing wires, I see. Too bad we've got no TV equipment, but Jody Hurd has a movie camera. We'll put Willow Grove on the map bigger'n Cape Canaveral ever was."

"We're with you on that, Carter!"

Ten minutes after the melodious voice of the Fianna's translator had requested escort to the village headman, the visitor was looking over the crowded courtroom with an expression reminiscent of a St. Bernard puppy hoping for a romp. The rustle of feet and throat-clearing subsided and the speaker began:

"People of the Green World, happy the cycle—"

Heads turned at the clump of feet coming down the side aisle; a heavy-torsoed man of middle age, bald, wearing a khaki shirt and trousers and rimless glasses and with a dark leather holster slapping his hip at each step, cleared the end of the front row of seats, planted himself, feet apart, yanked a heavy nickel-plated .44 revolver from the holster, took aim and fired five shots into the body of the Fianna at a range of ten feet.

The violet form whipped convulsively, writhed from the bench to the floor with a sound like a wet fire hose being dropped, uttered a gasping twitter, and lay still. The gunman turned, dropped the pistol, threw up his hands, and called:

"Sheriff Hoskins, I'm puttin myself in yer pertective custody."

There was a moment of stunned silence; then a rush of spectators for the alien. The sheriff's three - hundred - and - nine-pound bulk bellied through the shouting mob to take up a stand before the khaki-clad man.

"I always knew you was a mean one, Cecil Stump," he said, unlimbering handcuffs, "ever since I seen you makin' up them ground-glass baits for Joe Potter's dog. But I never thought I'd see you turn to cold-blooded murder." He waved at the bystanders. "Clear a path through here; I'm takin' my prisoner over to the jail."

"Jest a dad-blamed minute,

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Sheriff." Stump's face was pale, his glasses were gone and one khaki shoulder strap dangled — but what was almost a grin twisted one meaty cheek. He hid his hands behind his back, leaned away from the cuffs. "I don't like that word 'prisoner'. I ast you fer pertection. And better look out who you go throwin' that word 'murder' off at, too. I ain't murdered nobody."

The sheriff blinked, turned to roar, "How's the victim, Doc?"

A small gray head rose from bending over the limp form of the Fianna. "Deader'n a mackerel, Sheriff."

"I guess that's it. Let's go, Cecil."

"What's the charge?"

"First degree murder."

"Who'd I murder?"

"Why, you killed this here . . . this stranger."

"That ain't no stranger. That's a varmint. Murder's got to do with killin' humerns, way I understand it. You goin' to tell me that thing's humern?"

Ten people shouted at once:

"— human as I am!"

"— intelligent being!"

"— tell me you can simply kill—"

"— must be some kind of law—"

The sheriff raised his hands, his jowls drawn down in a scowl. "What about it, Judge Gates? Any law against Cecil Stump killing the . . . uh . . . ?"

The judge thrust out his lower lip. "Well, let's see," he began. "Technically—"

"Good Lord!" someone blurted. "You mean the laws on murder don't define what constitutes —I mean, what—"

"What a humern is?" Stump snorted. "Whatever it says, it sure-bob don't include no purple worms. That's a varmint, pure and simple. Ain't no different killin' it than any other critter."

"Then, by God, we'll get him for malicious damage," a man called. "Or hunting without a license — out of season!"

"— carrying concealed weapons!"

Stump went for his hip pocket, fumbled out a fat, shapeless wallet, extracted a thumbed rectangle of folded paper, offered it.

"I'm a licensed exterminator. Got a permit to carry the gun, too. I ain't broken no law." He grinned openly now. "Jest doin' my job, Sheriff. And at no charge to the county."

A smaller man with bristly red hair flared his nostrils at Stump. "You blood-thirsty idiot!" He raised a fist and shook it. "We'll be a national disgrace — worse than Little Rock! Lynching's too good for you!"

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"Hold on there, Weinstein," the sheriff cut in. "Let's not go gettin' no lynch talk started."

"Lynch, is it!" Cecil Stump bellowed, his face suddenly red. "Why, I done a favor for every man here! Now you listen to me! What is that thing over there?" He jerked a blunt thumb toward the judicial bench. "It's some kind of critter from Mars or someplace — you know that as well as me! And what's it here for? It ain't for the good of the likes of you and me, I can tell you that. It's them or us. And this time, by God, we got in the first lick!"

"Why you . . . you . . . hatemonger!"

"Now, hold on right there. I'm as liberal-minded as the next feller. Hell, I like a nigger — and I can't hardly tell a Jew from a white man. But when it comes to takin' in a damned purple worm and callin' it humern —that's where I draw the line."

Sheriff Hoskins pushed between Stump and the surging front rank of the crowd. "Stay back there! I want you to disperse, peaceably, and let the law handle this."

"I reckon I'll push off now, Sheriff," Stump hitched up his belt. "I figgered you might have to calm 'em down right at first, but now they've had a chance to think it over and see I ain't broken no law, ain't none of these law-abiding folks going to do anything illegal — like tryin' to get rough with a licensed exterminator just doin' his job." He stooped, retrieved his gun.

"Here, I'll take that," Sheriff Hoskins said. "You can consider your gun license canceled — and your exterminatin' license, too."

Stump grinned again, handed the revolver over.

"Sure. I'm cooperative, Sheriff. Anything you say. Send it around to my place when you're done with it." He pushed his way through the crowd to the corridor door.

"The rest of you stay put!" a portly man with a head of bushy white hair pushed his way through to the bench. "I'm calling an emergency Town Meeting to order here and now!"

He banged the gavel on the scarred bench top, glanced down at the body of the dead alien, now covered by a flag.

"Gentlemen, we've got to take fast action. If the wire services get hold of this before we've gone on record, Willow Grove'll be a blighted area."

"Look here, Willard," Judge Gates called, rising. "This — this mob isn't competent to take legal action."

"Never mind what's legal, Judge. Sure, this calls for Fed-

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eral legislation — maybe a Constitutional amendment — but in the meantime, we're going to redefine what constitutes a person within the incorporated limits of Willow Grove!"

"That's the least we can do," a thin-faced woman snapped, glaring at Judge Gates. "Do you think we're going to set here and condone this outrage?"

"Nonsense!" Gates shouted. "I don't like what happened any better than you do — but a person — well, a person's got two arms and two legs and—"

"Shape's got nothing to do with it," the chairman cut in. "Bears walk on two legs! Dave Zawocky lost his in the war. Monkeys have hands."

"Any intelligent creature—" the woman started.

"Nope, that won't do, either; my unfortunate cousin's boy Melvin was born an imbecile, poor lad. Now, folks, there's no time to waste. We'll find it very difficult to formulate a satisfactory definition based on considerations such as these. However, I think we can resolve the question in terms that will form a basis for future legislation on the question. It's going to make some big changes in things. Hunters aren't going to like it — and the meat industry will be affected. But if, as it appears, we're entering into an era of contact with . . . ah . . . creatures from other worlds, we've got to get our house in order."

"You tell 'em, Senator!" someone yelled.

"We better leave this for Congress to figger out!" another voice insisted.

"We got to do something. . ."

The senator held up his hands. "Quiet, everybody. There'll be reporters here in a matter of minutes. Maybe our ordinance won't hold water. But it'll start 'em thinking — and it'll make a lots better copy for Willow Grove than the killing."

"What you got in mind, Senator?"

"Just this:" the Senator said solemnly. "A person is . . . *any harmless creature. . .*"

Feet shuffled. Someone coughed.

"What about a man who commits a violent act, then?" Judge Gates demanded. "What's he, eh?"

"That's obvious, gentlemen," the senator said flatly. "He's vermin."

On the courthouse steps Cecil Stump stood, hands in hip pockets, talking to a reporter from the big-town paper in Mattoon, surrounded by a crowd of late-comers who had missed the excitement inside. He described the accuracy of his five shots,

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the sound they had made hitting the big blue snake, and the ludicrous spectacle the latter had presented in its death agony. He winked at a foxy man in overalls picking his nose at the edge of the crowd.

"Guess it'll be a while 'fore any more damned reptiles move in here like they owned the place," he concluded.

The courthouse doors banged wide; excited citizens poured forth, veering aside from Cecil Stump. The crowd around him thinned, broke up as its members collared those emerging with the hot news. The reporter picked a target.

"Perhaps you'd care to give me a few details of the action taken by the . . . ah . . . Special Committee, sir?"

Senator Custis pursed his lips. "A session of the Town Council was called," he said. "We've defined what a person is in this town—"

Stump, standing ten feet away, snorted. "Can't touch me with no *ex post factory* law."

"— and also what can be classified as vermin," Custis went on.

Stump closed his mouth with a snap.

"Here, that s'posed to be some kind of slam at me, Custis? By God, come election time. . ."

Above, the door opened again. A tall man in a leather jacket stepped out, stood looking down. The crowd pressed back. Senator Custis and the reporter moved aside. The newcomer came down the steps slowly. He carried Cecil Stump's nickel-plated .44 in his hand.

Standing alone now, Stump watched him.

"Here," he said. His voice carried a sudden note of strain. "Who're you?"

The man reached the foot of the steps, raised the revolver and cocked it with a thumb.

"I'm the new exterminator," he said.

—KEITH LAUMER

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SHAMAR'S WAR

BY KRIS NEVILLE

ILLUSTRATED BY GUINTA

He was Earth's secret weapon, as deadly as a sword—and two-edged!

I

The year was 2346, and Earth, at the time, was a political democracy.

The population was ruled by the Over-Council and, in order of decreasing importance, by Councils, and Local Councils. Each was composed of representatives duly apportioned by popular vote between the two contending parties. Executive direction was provided by a variety of Secretaries, selected by vote of the appropriate Councils. An independent Judiciary upheld the laws.

A unified Earth sent colonists to the stars. Back came strange tales and improbable animals.

Back, too, came word of a burgeoning technological civilization on the planet Itra, peopled by entirely humanoid aliens.

Earth felt it would be wise for Itra to join in a Galactic Federation and accordingly, submitted

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the terms of such a mutually advantageous agreement.

The Itraians declined...

Space Captain Merle S. Shaeffer, the youngest and perhaps the most naive pilot for Trans-Universe Transport, was called unexpectedly to the New York office of the company.

When Capt. Shaeffer entered the luxurious eightieth story suite, Old Tom Twilmaker, the President of TUT, greeted him. With an arm around his shoulder, Old Tom led Capt. Shaeffer to an immense inner office and introduced him to a General Reuter, identified as the Chairman of the Interscience Committee of the Over-Council.

No one else was present. With the door closed, they were isolated in Olympian splendor above and beyond the affairs of men. Here judgments were final and impartial. Capt. Shaeffer, in the presence of two of the men highest in the ruling councils of Earth, was reduced to incoherent awe.

General Reuter moved about restlessly. Old Tom was serene and beatific.

When they were seated, Old Tom swiveled around and gazed long in silence across the spires of the City. Capt. Shaeffer waited respectfully. General Reuter fidgetted.

"Some day," Old Tom said at last, "I'm going to take my leave of this. Yes, gentle Jesus! Oh, when I think of all the souls still refusing to admit our precious Savior, what bitterness, oh, what sorrow is my wealth to me! Look down upon the teeming millions below us. How many know not the Lord? Yes, some morning, I will forsake all this and go out into the streets to spend my last days bringing the words of hope to the weary and oppressed. Are you a Christian, Merle?"

General Reuter cracked his knuckles nervously while Capt. Shaeffer muttered an embarrassed affirmative.

"I am a deeply religious man," Old Tom continued. "I guess you've heard that, Merle?"

"Yes sir," Capt. Shaeffer said.

"But did you know that the Lord has summoned you here today?" Old Tom asked.

"No, sir," Capt. Shaeffer said.

"General Reuter, here, is a dear friend. We've known each other, oh, many years. Distantly related through our dear wives, in fact. And we serve on the same Board of Directors and the same Charity Committees... A few weeks ago, when he asked me for a man, I called for your file, Merle. I made discreet inquiries. Then I got down on my knees and talked it over with

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God for, oh, it must have been all of an hour. I asked, 'Is this the man?' And I was given a sign. Yes! At that moment, a shaft of sunlight broke through the clouds!"

General Reuter had continued his nervous movements throughout the speech. For the first time, he spoke. "Good God, Tom, serve us a drink." He turned to Capt. Shaeffer. "A little drink now and then helps a man relax. I'll just have mine straight, Tom."

Old Tom studied Capt. Shaeffer. "I do not feel the gentle Master approves of liquor."

"Don't try to influence him," General Reuter said. "You're embarrassing the boy."

"I—" Capt. Shaeffer began.

"Give him the drink. If he doesn't want to drink it, he won't have to drink it."

Sighing, Old Tom poured two bourbons from the bar in back of his desk and passed them over. Martyrdom sat heavily upon his brow.

After a quick twist of the wrist and an expert toss of the head, General Reuter returned an empty glass. "Don't mind if I do have another," he said. He was already less restless.

"How's your ability to pick up languages?" General Reuter asked.

"I learned Spanish and Russian at TUT PS," Capt. Shaeffer said apologetically. "I'm supposed to have a real high aptitude in languages, according to some tests I took. In case we should meet intelligent aliens, TUT gives them."

"You got no association with crackpot organizations, anything like that?" General Reuter asked. "You're either a good Liberal-Conservative or Radical-Progressive, aren't you? I don't care which. I don't believe in prying into a man's politics."

"I never belonged to anything," Capt. Shaeffer said.

"Oh, I can assure you, that's been checked out very, very thoroughly," Old Tom said.

The General signaled for another drink. With a sigh of exasperation, Old Tom complied.

"Bob," Old Tom said, "I really think you've had enough. Please, now. Our Master counsels moderation."

"Damn it, Tom," the General said and turned back to the space pilot. "May have a little job for you."

Old Tom shook his head at the General, cautioning him.

"Actually," the General said, ignoring the executive, "we'll be sort of renting you from TUT. In a way you'll still be working for them. I can get a million dollars out of the—"

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SHAMAR'S WAR

"Bob!"

"— unmarked appropriation if it goes in in TUT's name. No questions asked. National Defense. I couldn't get anywhere near that much for an individual for a year. It gives us a pie to slice. We were talking about it before you came in. How does a quarter of a million dollars a year sound to you?"

"When it comes to such matters," Old Tom interjected hastily, "I think first of the opportunities they bring to do good."

The General continued, "Now you know, Merle. And this is serious. I want you to listen to me. Because this comes under World Security laws, and I'm going to bind you to them. You know what that means? You'll be held responsible."

"Yes, sir," Merle said, swallowing stiffly. "I understand."

"Good. Let's have a drink on that."

"Please be quiet, General," Old Tom said. "Let me explain. You see, Merle, the Interscience Committee was recently directed to consider methods for creating a climate of opinion on Itra — of which I'm sure you've heard — which would be favorable to the proposed Galactic Federation."

"Excuse me," General Reuter said. "They don't have a demo-

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cracy, like we do. They don't have any freedom like we do. I have no doubt the average what-everyoucallem — Itraians, I guess — the average gooks — would be glad to see us come in and just kick the hell out of whoever is in charge of them."

"Now, General," Old Tom said more sharply.

"But that's not the whole thing," the General continued. "Even fit were right thing to do, an' I'm not saying isn't — right thing to do — there's log-lo-logistics. I don't want to convey the impresh, impression that our Defense Force people have been wasting money. Never had as much as needed, fact. No, it's like this.

"We have this broad base to buil' from. Backbone. But we live in a democracy. Now, Old Tom's Liberal-Conservative. And me, I'm Radical-Progresshive. But we agree on one thing: importance of strong defense. A lot of people don' understan' this. Feel we're already spendin' more than we can afford. But I want to ask them, what's more important than the defense of our planet?"

"General, I'm afraid this is not entirely germane," Old Tom said stiffly.

"Never mind that right now. Point is, it will take us long time to get the serious nature of the menace of Itra across to the voters. Then, maybe fifteen, twenty years... Let's just take one thing. We don't have anywhere near enough troop transports to carry out the occupation of Itra. You know how long it takes to build them? My point is, we may not have that long. Suppose Itra should get secret of interstellar drive tomorrow, then where would we be?"

Old Tom slammed his fist on the desk. "General, please! The boy isn't interested in all that."

The General surged angrily to his feet. "By God, that's what's wrong with this world today!" he cried. "Nobody's interested in Defense. Spend only a measly twenty per cent of the Gross World Product on Defense, and expect to keep strong! Good God, Tom, give me a drink!" Apparently heresy had shocked him sober.

Old Tom explained, "The General is a patriot. We all respect him for it."

"I understand," Capt. Shaeffer said.

General Reuter hammered his knuckles in rhythm on the table. "The drink, the drink, the drink! You got more in the bottle. I saw it!"

Old Tom rolled his eyes Heavenward and passed the bottle across. "This is all you get. This is all I've got."

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The General held the bottle up to the light. "Should have brought my own. Let's hurry up and get this over with."

Old Tom smiled the smile of the sorely beset and persecuted and said, "You see, Merle, there's massive discontent among the population of Itra. We feel we should send a man to the planet to, well, foment change and, uh, hasten the already inevitable overthrow of the despotic government. That man will be strictly on his own. The Government will not be able to back him in any way whatsoever once he lands on Itra."

The General had quickly finished the bottle. "You she," he interrupted, "there's one thing they can't fight, an' that's an idea. Jus' one man goes to Itra with the idea of Freedom, that's all it'll take. How many men did it take to start the 'Merican Revolution? Jefferson. The Russian Revolution? Marx!"

"Yes," Old Tom said. "One dedicated man on Itra, preaching the ideas of Liberty—liberty with responsibility and property rights under one God. That man can change a world." Exhausted by the purity of his emotions, Old Tom sat back gasping to await the answer.

"A quarter of a million dollars a year?" Capt. Shaeffer asked at length.

II

The Itraians spoke a common language. It was somewhat guttural and highly inflected. Fortunately, the spelling appeared to be phonetic, with only forty-three characters being required. As near as anyone could tell, centuries of worldwide communication had eliminated regional pecularities. The speech from one part of Itra was not distinguishable from that of another part.

Most of the language was recovered from spy tapes of television programs. A dictionary was compiled laborously by a special scientific task force of the Over-Council. The overall program was directed and administered by Intercontinental Iron, Steel, Gas, Electricity, Automobiles and Synthetics, Incorporated.

It took Shaeffer just short of three years to speak Itraian sufficiently well to convince non-Itraians that he spoke without accent.

The remainder of his training program was administered by a variety of other large industrial concerns. The training was conducted at a Defense Facility.

At the end of his training, Shaeffer was taken by special bus to the New Mexican space port. A ship waited.

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The car moved smoothly from the Defense Force Base, down the broad sixteen-lane highway, through the surrounding slum area and into Grants.

Sight of the slums gave Shaeffer mixed emotions.

It was not a feeling of superiority to the inhabitants; those he had always regarded with a circumspect indifference. The slums were there. He supposed they always would be there. But now, for the first time in his life, he could truly say that he had escaped their omnipresent threat once and for all. He felt relief and guilt.

During the last three years, he had earned $750,000.

As a civilian stationed on a Defense Force Base, he had, of course, to pay for his clothing, his food and his lodging. But the charge was nominal. Since he had been given only infrequent and closely supervised leaves, he had been able to spend, altogether, only $12,000.

Which meant that now, after taxes, he had accumulated in his savings account a total of nearly $60,000 awaiting his return from Itra.

Shaeffer's ship stood off Itra while he prepared to disembark.

In his cramped quarters, he dressed himself in Itraian-style clothing. Capt. Merle S. Shaeffer became Shamar the Worker.

In addition to his jump equipment, an oxygen cylinder, a face mask and a shovel, he carried with him eighty pounds of counterfeit Itraian currency . . . all told, forty thousand individual bills of various denominations. Earth felt this would be all he needed to survive in a technologically advanced civilization.

His plan was as follows:

1. He was to land in a sparsely inhabited area on the larger masses.

2. He was to procure transportation to Xxla, a major city, equivalent to London or Tokyo. It was the headquarters for the Party.

3. He was to establish residence in the slum area surrounding the University of Xxla.

4. Working through student contacts, he was to ingratiate himself with such rebel intellectuals as could be found.

5. Once his contacts were secure, he was to assist in the preparation of propaganda and establish a clandestine press for its production.

6. As quickly as the operation was self-sufficient, he was to move on to another major city . . . and begin all over.

The ship descended into the atmosphere. The bell rang. Shamar the Worker seated himself,

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put on his oxygen mask and signaled his readiness. He breathed oxygen. The ship quivered, the door fell away beneath him and he was battered unconscious by the slipstream.

Five minutes later, pinwheeling lazily in free fall, he opened his eyes. For an instant's panic he could not read the altimeter. Then seeing that he was safe, he noted his physical sensations. He was extremely cold. Gyrating wildly, he beat his chest to restore circulation.

He stabilized his fall by stretching out his hands. He floated with no sensation of movement. Itra was overhead, falling up at him slowly. He turned his back to the planet and checked the time. Twelve minutes yet to go.

He spent, in all, seventeen minutes in free fall. At 2000 feet, he opened his parachute. The sound was like an explosion.

He floated quietly, recovering from the shock. He removed his oxygen mask and tasted the alien air. He sniffed several times. It was not unpleasant.

Below was darkness. Then suddenly the ground came floating up and hit him.

The terrain was irregular. He fought the chute to collapse it, tripped, and twisted his ankle painfully.

The chute lay quiet and he sat on the ground and cursed in English.

At length he bundled up the chute and removed all of the packages of money but the one disguised as a field pack. He used the shovel to dig a shallow grave at the base of a tree. He interred the chute, the oxygen cylinder, the mask, the shovel and scooped dirt over them with his hands.

He sat down and unlaced his shoe and found his ankle badly swollen. Distant, unfamiliar odors filled him with apprehension and he started at the slightest sound.

Dawn was breaking.

III

Noting his bearings carefully, he hobbled painfully westward, with thirty pounds of money on his back. He would intersect the major North-South Intercontinental highway by at least noon.

Two hours later, he came to a small plastic cabin in a clearing at the edge of a forest.

Wincing now with each step, he made his way to the door. He knocked.

There was a long wait.

The door opened. A girl stood before him in a dressing gown. She frowned and asked, *"Itsil obwatly jer gekompilp?"*

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Hearing Itarian spoken by a native in the flesh had a powerful emotional impact on Shamar the Worker.

Stumblingly, he introduced himself and explained that he was camping out. During the previous night he had become lost and injured his ankle. If she could spare him food and directions, he would gladly pay.

With a smile of superiority, she stepped aside and said in Itraian, "Come in, Chom the Worker."

He felt panic, but he choked it back and followed her. Apparently he had horribly mispronounced his own name. It was as though, in English he had said Barchestershire for Barset. He cursed whatever Professor had picked that name for whatever obscure reason.

"Sit down," she invited. "I'm about to have breakfast. Eggs and bacon—" the Itraian equivalent — "if that's all right with you. I'm Garfling Germadpoldlt by the way, although you can call me Ge-Ge."

The food was quite unpleasant, as though overly ripe. He was able to choke down the eggs with the greatest difficulty. Fortunately, the hot drink that was the equivalent of Earth coffee at the end of the meal, was sufficently spicy to quiet his stomach.

"Good coffee," he said.

"Thank you. Care for a cigarette?"

"I sure would."

He had no matches, so she lit it for him, hovering above him a moment, leaving with him the fresh odor of her hair.

The taste of the cigarette was mild. Rather surprisingly, it substituted for nicotine and allayed the sharp longing that had come with the coffee.

"Let's look at your ankle," she said. She knelt at his feet and began to unlace the right shoe. "My, it's swollen," she said sympathetically.

He winced as she touched it and then he reddened with embarrassment. He had been walking across dusty country. He drew back the foot and bent to restrain her.

Playfully she slapped his hand away. "You sit back! I'll get it. I've seen dirty feet before."

She pulled off the shoe and peeled off the sock. "Oh, God, it is swollen," she said. "You think it's broken, Shamar?"

"Just sprained."

"I'll get some hot water with some MedAid in it, and that'll take the swelling out."

When he had his foot in the water, she sat across from him and arranged her dressing gown with a coquettish gesture. She caught him staring at the ear-

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ring, and one hand went to it caressingly. She smiled that universal feminine smile of security and recklessness, of invitation and rejection.

"You're engaged," he noted.

She opened her eyes wide and studied him above a thumbnail which she tasted with her teeth. "I'm engaged to Von Stutsman —" as the name might be translated — "perhaps you've heard of him? He's important in the Party. You know him?"

"No."

"You in the Party?" she said. She was teasing him now. Then, suddenly: "Neither am I, but I guess I'll have to join if I become Mrs. Von Stutsman."

They were silent for a moment.

Then she spoke, and he was frozen in terror, all thoughts but of self-preservation washed from his mind.

"Your accent is unbelieveably bad," she said.

"I'm from Zuleb," he said lamely, at last.

"Meta — Gelwhops — or even Karkeqwol, that makes no difference. Nobody on Itra speaks like you do. So you must be from that planet that had the Party in a flap several years ago — Earth, isn't it?"

He said nothing.

"Do you know what they'll do when they catch you?" she asked.

"No," he said hollowly.

"They'll behead you."

She laughed, not unkindly. "If you could see yourself! How ridiculous you look, Shamar. I wonder what your real name is, by the way? Sitting with a foot in the water and looking wildly about. Here, let me fix more coffee and we can talk."

She called cheerily over her shoulder, "You're safe here. No one will be by. I'm not due back until Tuesday."

She brought him a steaming mug. "Drink this while I dress." She disappeared into the bedroom. He heard the shower running.

He sat waiting, numb and desperate, and drank the coffee because it was there. His thoughts scampered in the cage of his skull like mice on a treadmill.

When Ge-Ge came back, he had still not resolved the conflict within him. She stood barefoot upon the rug and looked down at him, hunched miserably over the pan of water, now lukewarm.

"How's the foot?"

"All right."

"Want to take it out?"

"I guess."

"I'll get a towel."

She waited until he had dried the foot and restored the sock and shoe. The swelling was gone.

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He stood up and put his weight on it. He smiled wanly. "It's okay now. It's not broken, I guess."

She gestured him to the sofa. He complied.

"What's in the field pack?" she asked. "Money? How much?" She moved toward it. He half rose to stop her, but by then she had it partly open. "My," she said, bringing out a thick sheaf of bills. She rippled them sensuously. "Pretty. Very, very pretty." She examined them for texture and appearance. "They look good, Shamar. I'll bet it would cost ten million dollars in research on paper and ink and presses to do this kind of a job. Only another government has got that kind of money to throw around." She tossed the currency carelessly beside him and came to sit at his side.

She took his hand. Her hand was warm and gentle. "Tell me, Shamar," she said. "Tell me all about it."

So this is how easily spies are trapped in real life, Shamar told himself with numb disbelief.

The story came out slowly and hesistantly at first. She said nothing until he had finished.

"And that's all? You really believe that, don't you? And I guess your government does, too. That all we need is just some little idea or something." She turned away from him. "But of course, that's neither here nor there, is it? I never imagined an adventurer type would look like you. You have such a soft, honest voice. As a little girl, I pictured myself being carried off by a tanned desert sheik on a camel; and oh, he was lean and handsome! With dark flashing eyes and murderously heavy lips and hands like iron! Well, that's life, I guess." She stood and paced the room. "Let me think. We'll pick up a flyer in Zelonip when we catch the bus next Tuesday. How much does the money weigh?"

"Eighty pounds."

"I can carry about 10 pounds in my bag. You can take your field pack. How much is in it? Thirty pounds? That'll leave about forty which we can ship through on extra charges. Then, when we get to Xxla, I can hide you out in an apartment over on the East side."

"Why would you run a risk like that for me?" he asked.

She brushed the hair from her face. "Let's say — what? I don't really think you can make it, because it's so hopeless. But maybe, just maybe, you might be one of the rare ones who, if he plays his cards right, can beat the system. I love to see them licked!

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"Well, I'm a clerk. That's all. Just a lowly clerk in one of the Party offices. I met Von Stutsman a year ago. This is his cabin. He lets me use it.

"He's older than I am; but there's worse husband material. But then again, he's about to be transferred to one of the big agricultural combines way out in the boondocks where there's no excitement at all. Just little old ladies and little old men and peasants having children.

"I'm a city girl. I like Xxla. And if I marry him, all that goes up the flue. I'll be marooned with him, God knows where, for years. Stuck, just stuck.

"Still — he is Von Stutsman, and he's on his way up. Everyone says that. Ten, twenty years, he'll be back to Xxla, and he'll come back on top.

"Oh . . . I don't know what I want to do! If I marry him, I can get all the things I've always wanted. Position, security. He's older than I am, but he's really a nice guy. It's just that he's dull. He can't talk about anything but Party, Party, Party.

"That's what I came out to this cabin for. To think things over, to try to get things straightened out. And then you came along. Maybe it gives me a chance for something exciting before I ship off to the boondocks. Does that make sense to you?

"I'll get married and sit out there, and I'll turn the pages of the Party magazine and smile sweetly to myself. Because, you see, I'll always be able to lean forward and say, 'Dear? Once upon a time, I helped hide an Earth spy in Xxla.' And that'll knock that silly and self-satisfied look off his face for once. . . . Oh, I don't know! Let me alone!" With that, she fled to the bedroom and slammed the door behind her.

He could hear her sobbing helplessly.

In the afternoon, she came out. He had fallen asleep. She shook him gently to waken him.

"Eh? Oh! Huh?" He smiled foolishly.

"Wash up in there," she told him. "I'm sorry I blew up on you this morning. I'll cook something."

When he came back, she was serving them their dinner on steaming platters.

"Look, Ge-Ge," he said over coffee. "You don't like your government. We'll help you out. There's this Galactic Federation idea." He explained to her the cross-fertilization of the two cultures.

"Shamar, my friend," she said, "did you see Earth's proposal? There was nothing in it about giving us an interstellar drive. We were required to give Earth

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all transportation franchises. The organization you used to work for was to be given, as I remember it, an exclusive ninety-nine year right to carry all Earth-Itra commerce. It was all covered in the newspapers, didn't you see it?"

Shamar said, "Well, now, I'm not familiar with the details. I wasn't keeping up with them. But I'm sure these things could be, you know, worked out. Maybe, for Security reasons, we didn't want to give you the interstellar drive right off, but you can appreciate our logic there. Once we saw you were, well, like us, a peace-loving planet, once you'd changed your government to a democracy, you would see it our way and you'd have no complaints on that score."

"Let's not talk politics," she said wearily. "Maybe it's what you say, and I'm just naturally suspicious. I don't want to talk about it."

"Well, I was just trying to help —"

The sentence was interrupted by a monstrous explosion.

"Good God!" Shamar cried. "What was that?"

"Oh, that," Ge-Ge said, shaking off the effects. "They were probably testing one of their damned automated factories to see if it was explosion proof and it wasn't."

IV

During the week alone in the cabin, Ge-Ge fell in love with Shamar.

"Oh, my God!" she cried. "What will I do when they catch you? I'll die, Shamar! I couldn't bear it. We'll go to Xxla, we'll hide away as quietly as two mice, somewhere. We won't go out. The two of us, alone but together, behind closed doors and drawn shades. Nobody will ever know about us. We'll be the invisible people."

Shamar protested. "I don't see how we can ever be secure until something's done about your government. As long as you don't reach some kind of agreement with Earth, I'll be an outlaw. I'll be afraid any minute they'll tap my shoulder and come and take me away. I don't think we could hold up under that. We'd be at each other in no time."

She wept quietly.

The last day in the cabin, they went out and dug up the rest of the money. The trip to Xxla took place without incident. Ge-Ge rented an apartment for him, and he safely checked in. She went shopping for food and clothing.

Thereafter she came nearly every evening. They would eat and she would reveal the incon-

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sequential details of the office regime to which she was daily exposed. After dinner, they would sit in the living room and practice Itraian and neck a little. Then she would go home.

One day, after a month of this routine, she threw herself into his arms and sobbed, "I gave Von Stutsman back his earring today. It was the only fair thing to do. I'm afraid he knows about us. He's had me watched. I know he has. I admitted it was another man."

Shamar held her tensely.

She broke away. "You were born in Zuleb, you suffered amnesia, you woke up in a ditch one morning without papers. You've been an itinerant worker since. Things like that happen all the time. You hit a big lottery ticket a few months ago. I told him that. How can he check it?"

"You told him I didn't have any papers?"

"Millions of people don't have any papers — the drifters, people that do casual labor, the people that don't work at all. The thing is, without papers he doesn't have any way to check on you. Oh, you should have seen his face when I gave him back his earring. He was absolutely livid. I didn't think he had it in him. I suppose I'll have to quit my job now. Oh, if you only had papers so we could be married!"

Ge-Ge's mood, that evening, alternated between despair and optimism. In the end, she was moros and restless. She repeated several times, "I just don't know what's going to happen to us."

"Ge-Ge," he said, "I can't spend my life in this apartment. I've got to get out."

"You're mad." She faced him from across the room. She stood with her legs apart, firmly set. "Well, I don't care what happens any more. I can't stand things to go on like they are. I'll introduce you to some people I know, since you won't be happy until I do. But God help us!"

After approving his accent, which had improved under her tutelage, Ge-Ge took him to a party the following Saturday.

The party was held in an ill-lighted railroad flat. People congregated cross-legged on the bare floor.

Shamar listened to a man complaining that citizens were being taxed beyond all endurance to support the enforced automation program. "They aren't interested in building consumer goods. They're interested in building factories to build consumer goods and blow them up testing them. Or the factories

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are always obsolete just as soon as they finish them, and they can't phase into their new production setup and Hundred Year Plan."

Ge-Ge whispered a warning to him to beware of spies.

"Spies?"

"The Party," she said, drawing him to one side.

"But — but — you mean the Party just lets people talk like this?"

"Whatever harm does it do?" she asked. "Everybody benefits from talking out their aggressions. Now, have another drink and relax, and Shamar, be careful! Nobody minds local crackpots, but nobody wants *foreign* crackpots!"

She led him to another drink and left him standing with the host.

"Nice party," Shamar said.

"Thank you," the host said. "I find it very invigorating. As long as there's still people that think and that criticize on this planet, I feel there's hope, don't you? This is your first time? I don't recall your face. I have a study group that meets Wednesday nights. You're welcome to come. We have very stimulating discussions about government and politics. Please do come, any time you can. Just drop in any time after eight. What was your name again?"

"Shamar the Worker."

"Interesting name," the host said. "Another drink?"

Later, Shamar found himself in an intense conversation with a bearded youth of perhaps seventeeen.

"A guy's responsible for his own conduct, right? Right! I'm responsible for *their* conduct? Each man goes to hell in his own way, right? Right! I don't want anything to do with them. You can't do anything about it, man, that's what I'm telling you. I don't seem to be getting through. Don't you see, it's a machine . . . "

"But if everybody joined the Party," Shamar suggested.

"So everybody joins? So what's new? Okay, you vote in the Party elections. What do you get? You get these two guys running for office: one is slightly left of center and one is slightly right of center. And both are four-square for the Automated Factory Program. Just suppose you did get a radical — suppose they accidentally let one slip through? He goes off and they argue him into line, and when he comes back, you say, 'Like, man, what happened?' And so he tells you, 'Well, I couldn't do anything about it.' That's just what I'm telling you."

"I can't see that," Shamar said. "I just don't believe that."

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At another time, Shamar tried to explain free elections to a female. He was informed, "Man, just give me a way to cast a vote against all those crumbs — and then I'll think twice about all this guff you're peddling."

A sober, scholarly man told him, "Join the Party? Whatever for? You join the Party and you're expected to spend all your free evenings at rallies and meetings and speeches and in ceremonial parades in honor of the ground breaking for a new automated factory. No, thank you."

Another told him, "You need a lesson in economics, son. What do you mean by free society? The only way you can run an industrial society is to limit production. If you produce enough for everybody, the government would produce itself out of business. Look here. The Party has millions of tabulating machines of one kind or another clicking happily away day and night arranging production to fit income distribution. They've never been known to goof and produce a surplus of anything. Why, damn it, if every man, woman and child in the world went out to buy a pound of nails apiece, the shortage of nails would be fantastic. But would they produce more nails? You know they wouldn't. 'So you want more nails?' they'd say. 'Well, damn you, work for them!' And the price would go up. See what I mean, son? They'd have another stick to beat us with."

Later, Shamar found himself seated on the floor across from an aesthetic in his late thirties. "You see, my friend, force and violence never accomplish their stated ends. We must stand firmly on the principle of non-violence."

"But that's taking it laying down," Shamar protested.

"No! Sometimes I think it goes to the very core of human existence. Perhaps this is the central import of all philosophy: the way things are done is more important than the ends that are obtained."

At that point, Ge-Ge arrived breathlessly. "Shamar, quickly! We must go!"

"Huh? I'm having this interesting little talk—"

She tugged him from the floor. Baffled, he followed her. As he did so, the fighting broke out in the far corner of the room.

"Quickly!" she said. "Let's get out of here before the police come."

They fought their way, hand in hand, to the door. There they paused for a moment to look back.

"It's a couple of rival socialist parties fighting," she explained breathlessly.

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"What about?"

"God knows. Hurry."

They were in the street. "Don't run, walk," she cautioned. After a block, she said, "I didn't even need to watch you at the end. Everybody got so drunk nobody noticed you much."

"Even the spies?"

"Oh, they always get the drunkest."

The siren sounded.

"Let's hurry."

When they arrived at Shamar's apartment, she asked, "Well, what did you think of the party?"

"It was an education," he said after a moment.

V

The following week Shamar spent many hours walking the streets of Xxla. He tried to convince himself that the people he had met at the party were not representative.

They were.

Friday night Ge-Ge announce "Shamar, I can't stand much more of this! What's going to happen? What is Von Stutsman going to do? He's onto something. I sometimes wish — oh, God! — I sometimes wish something would happen so we'd know where we stand, so we'd know what to do!" He tried to put an arm around her, but she brushed it away. "Don't! Let me alone!"

She retired to the other side of the room. For a moment, and for no reason, the hostility in the air between them was like ice and fire.

"I'm sorry," Ge-Ge said curtly.

"That's all right," Shamar said, his voice cold and distant.

"Let's talk about something else."

They were silent for a minute. Then he said, "I wanted to ask you. Of all the people I talked to, I couldn't find anyone who seemed to give a damn, one way or the other, about Earth. Why is that? You'd think they'd be at least talking about Earth."

"Why should they be? We've got our own problems."

At that point, the police arrived and took Shamar the Worker away.

They put him in a cell in which there were already three other prisoners.

"What you in for, buddy?"

Shamar studied the prisoner for a moment without answering. His companions looked up.

"No visible means of support," Shamar said.

"I'm Long John Freed."

Shamar nodded.

"They're trying to hook you for evading the productivity tax, huh?"

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Shamar declined comment.

Freed settled back on his bunk. "I say take them for all you can. Now, look, you're a little guy. So they bleed us white. Take a factory manager or an important Black Market operator — you think they pay taxes? You can bet they don't. It's a racket. The poor pay and pay because they can't hire fancy lawyers to lie for them; and the rich take and take. I don't see why the Party puts up with it."

Freed shifted his position. "Say what you will about the Party — and I know it's got it's faults—still, there are dedicated men in it. I may be a small-time crook, but I'm as patriotic as the next man. The Party's done a lot of good.

"First time for you? How old are you, twenty-seven or so? First time, they usually try to recruit you for the Factory Force.

"It's not such a bad racket. When you start out, they toss you in with lots of kids — usually the draftees. You get six weeks pick-and-shovel, and you're really dragging when you finish that. Then comes specialist school.

"Try to get in as an electrician or plumber. Plasterers or bricklayers have to work too hard. Carpentry's not bad — I'd hold

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out for cabinet-making, rather than rough carpentry, if I had to go into that. Then there's real specialties. Tile laying. You have to have a personality for that, or you'd go nuts. Demolition's not too bad; you blow up obsolete factories. That would have been right down my alley."

Freed was silent a moment, then he resumed:

"Sometimes I may talk like a radical, and maybe I am a little of a radical, I don't know. You look at the overall picture, things ain't too bad. I've known a lot of thieves and petty crooks in my time. As a class, for pure patriotism, I'll stack them up against anybody you can name; and in a way, you know, I'm kind of proud of that... Well, let's shut up and get some shuteye."

When finally he slept, Shamar dreamed that the Party was a vast, invulnerable pyramid resting on the shifting base of the population. It was constructed to dampen out vibrations. The bottom quivered, and the quiver ran upward a few inches and was absorbed. The top of the pyramid remained stable, fixed and motionless, indifferent even to its own foundation. The pyramid was built like an earthquake-proof tower. It was built to last. The Party was built to govern. It need only devote itself to its own preservation. Any other issue was secondary.

It was an organic machine. The gears were flesh and blood. The people on top were maintenance engineers. Their job was to go around with an oil can that they could squirt when necessary to keep friction to a minimum.

He awakened the following morning ravenously hungry and was hugely disappointed by breakfast. Even discounting his somewhat biased viewpoint, the food was inedible.

Freed accepted Shamar's share eagerly with the comment, "It'll taste better after you miss a few meals. It always does."

An hour later, the jailer came to open the cell.

"Shamar the Worker? Get your stuff. We're going."

Ge-Ge was waiting in the reception room. Her hair had been especially waved for the occasion. She wore a suit newly pressed and gleaming. She had tears in her eyes.

She fled to his arms. "Darling!" she cried, caressing his face with childlike wonder. "Was it awful? Did they beat you?"

"I'm fine."

"Darling, we're going to get you out on bail. I've made all the arrangements. We just have to go to the Judge's chambers

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for a minute, and they'll let you go. Thank God you're going to be out of this horrible place, at least for a little while."

The jailer brought Shamar's belt and his bag of possessions. Shamar signed a receipt for them and they went to the Judge.

The Judge said, "Please be seated." He had a resonant and friendly voice. He went to his desk and sat down.

Ge-Ge and Shamar seated themselves before him.

"Ah, you young people," he said. "Now, you must be Shamar the Worker, and you—"

"Garfling Germadpoldlt."

"Of course." He turned to Shamar. "I hate to see a fine young person like you in trouble, Shamar. It seems to me such a waste. Man and boy, for sixty years I've been a dedicated worker for the Party. Oh, Shamar, when I think of that glorious paradise to come — that time of wealth and plenty for all—that time when the riches and abundance of Mother Itra will, from Automation, overflow alike the homes of the rich and poor. . ."

They waited.

He continued. "Here I sit, year after year, Garfling and Shamar, judging my fellow men. Judging poor creatures who do not live the Dream. I sometimes feel that this is not the way. I sometimes feel my job is out there on the street corners, preaching the Dream, awakening the souls, telling the story of love and beauty and abundance in the life to come.

"Ah, me. But the world is not yet perfect, is it? And man's understanding is imperfect. Here you are before me today, Shamar, with no visible means of support and no record of having paid productivity taxes. Oh, what a grim and fearful picture! In all your life have you ever once thought of your obligation to the future? You have failed yourself; you have failed the Party; and failed the future.

"Yet — in a larger sense — although this in no way militates against your own guilt — have we not failed you? How have we permitted a human soul to degrade himself to the point where we must punish him?"

Abruptly, the Judge stood up. "Well, I've done the best I can. I remand you to the custody of Miss Germadpoldlt. Your trial will be set at a later date. You are not to leave Xxla without permission of this court. And I hope my lecture today has fallen on fertile soil. It is not too late to correct your ways. And I may say, if I am the one who hears your case, your conduct between now and the trial may have some bearing on the outcome."

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They took a taxi back to his apartment. Ge-Ge trembled violently most of the way and nestled against him; they murmured their affection.

After he had been fed, she said nervously, "It was Von Stutsman who was responsible for your arrest. I should have known we couldn't fight the Party. If he digs hard enough, nothing on Itra can save us."

Finally, she went out to canvas lawyers.

She came back at dusk.

"Shamar, darling," she said, "I've located him. I asked a lot of my friends, and he's the best. He's a big lawyer for left-wing people. I talked to him. I told him everything."

"What! You told him everything?"

"Why, yes."

"You, you told him I was an Earthman?" He grabbed her by the shoulders. "Listen, Ge-Ge! I was arrested on a charge I could beat; now look what you've done. What makes you think he won't turn me over to the Party? This is too big, now! This isn't just a tax avoidance matter, this is treason for him."

"It's all right, darling," she said soothingly, breaking free from him. "I had to tell him so he'd take the case. Why would a big man like him want to defend a common vagrant?"

Shamar closed his mouth. "But — you mean, he won't tell anyone?"

"Of course not."

"Has the man no patriotism?"

"Look, Shamar," she said in exasperation, "you once asked me why the people in the street aren't upset about Earth. I'm beginning to see the way you think. What you mean is, aren't we *afraid* of Earth? Aren't we afraid Earth would, oh, do something like invade us or something? That's what you mean."

"Of course it is."

"Once upon a time," she said, "when we first got space flight, the Party got all shook up about the possibility of some hostile force out there developing an interstellar drive and coming along and doing their will with us. They asked the computers about it. Invading and conquering a planet is such a vast technological undertaking that the mind just boggles at it. Don't forget, we've got a warning network out there. They're not very alert, or you wouldn't have gotten through, but they wouldn't miss an invasion fleet. There's computer-controlled chemical rockets in orbit, and we've got a few sited on Itra that can blast down anything that slows up to try to land. It wouldn't take one-hundredth, it wouldn't take one-thousandth of the technological

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resources required to defend Itra that it would to attack her. Earth just simply can't afford to attack us. They'd go broke trying. Every million dollars you spent to get here, we'd spend a thousand to keep you from landing.

"Oh, I suppose if Earth wanted to, they might figure out some way to blow up Itra. But where's the profit in that? We're not bothering you. Why spend all that money when it's not going to get you one damn thing in return?"

The following day, Shamar called on the lawyer, Counselor Freemason.

Counselor Freemason inquired politely as to the state of his financial reserves. Shamar replied reassuringly.

"Good, good. That's most encouraging. Most encouraging indeed. We need not place any limit on our ingenuity, then.

"I've been thinking about your case, Mr. Worker. The thing first to do, in my opinion, is to stir up public sympathy in your favor. It's almost an ideal case. It has no real political overtones. It's not as if you're accused of anything serious. Well, I believe I can interest some friends of mine who are always deeply concerned with cases involving the infringement of an individual's liberty — provided, of course, there are no political overtones. I can think of several good people who would be willing to head up a Defense Committee. The fact that we have and I'm talking now about as much as, oh, one hundred thousand dollars?" He paused interrogatively.

"I'm prepared to pay," Shamar said.

"Maybe even more," Councilman Freemason continued quickly. "We can come to that later. The important thing right now is to get down to work on your case."

"Counselor Freemason, now, obviously I'm not a lawyer," Shamar said, "and I know it's bad business to tell a professional how to run his job. But I believe Miss Germadpoldlt explained the, ah, rather unusual delicacy of my own position. It would seem to me that the less publicity we got, the better."

Counselor Freemason shook a pen at him. "A very good point, Mr. Worker. It shows you're thinking, and I'm glad of the opportunity to explain the reasons for this recommendation. If I brazenly parade you before them, you see, by implication it means we're not afraid of your background being examined. We have nothing to hide. Consequently, they will not look for anything. If, on the other hand,

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I'm cautious, fearful, defensive, they'll ask themselves, 'What's Counselor Freemason trying to hide?' And they'll start digging into your past.

"Now, I hope that clears that matter up to your satisfaction? Good. Good. I'll get right to work on your case. Do you have anything else? Miss Germadpoldt explained rather nicely, I think, yesterday. As far as anyone knows, you're a man without papers. You've never paid any taxes but they have no proof you owe taxes. You won money in the lottery. You collected anonymously; lots of people do for perfectly valid reasons. Let them prove you didn't win. The Party can't be very interested in a man like that.

"So. I'll raise an issue. Maybe we'll suggest that any lottery winner is likely to be persecuted. The Party wants things to go smoothly. The lottery makes the people feel as if, you know, they actually own a piece of things. And too many people don't have papers.

"My job is to take the specific and convert it to a vague general principle that a number of people feel deeply about. The Party will take the easy way out: they're not dumb. They've learned from experience. You're not worth that much trouble to them. Otherwise, there'll be a period of aggravation, people without papers beating up police and things like that."

Three days later, Shamar met with the newly formed Committee of One Hundred for Justice to Shamar the Worker.

There were five members of the Committee and Counselor Freemason in attendance. They briefed him on their initial activities.

They had printed letterheads and were circulating letters to people known to be friendly, with a hastily printed booklet giving the facts of the case.

"As you can see," Counselor Freemason said, "we're off to a very fast start. Um, the question naturally arises as to finances. I have advanced a certain amount out of my own pocket... We will need more than I can conveniently scrape together at the moment, and I'm reluctant to — ah — impose on the Committee for a loan insofar as—"

"I took the liberty of bringing along some cash," Shamar said. "For current expenses and, of course, your retainer."

They looked relieved. "Excellent, excellent. I might suggest, Mr. Worker, that we appoint one of the Committee as treasurer — perhaps Mrs. Freetle, here—" the lady smiled — "to take these financial worries off your mind.

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This will leave you free to devote yourself fully to activities defense."

"Now that that's out of the way," one of the male Committee members said, "let's get right down to business. As you can see, we're moving fast. Our overall strategy is this. We must first establish a public image for you, Mr. Worker, an image the average man can identify with. Counselor Freemason has described your case to us. I simply don't know what the Party's coming to to permit a man like Von Stutsman to persecute you this way. Oh, I tell you, it makes my blood boil, Mr. Worker!"

Others of the Committee chimed in and the sentiment passed heatedly among them.

"Well," said Counselor Freemason, "I guess that about winds it up for the moment. You all know where to reach me. Any time, day or night. I guess, Mr. Worker, if you'll just turn the money over to Mrs. Freetle. And I think, Mr. Hall, if you'd hire that speech writer — what's his name? McGoglhy? — to work with Mr. Worker on his speeches."

"Speeches?" Shamar asked.

"You're going to be our featured speaker at all the rallies, of course," Mrs. Freetle said. "I know you will do splendidly, just splendidly! Your accent is so captivating. I've never heard anything quite like it."

VI

On the evening of his first public appearance, Shamar was given a neatly typed speech. He rehearsed it hurriedly, stammers and all.

"Fellow citizens! As I stand here, looking over this sea of faces, hearing your applause and seeing how your hearts go out to one poor man in distress, it — I — Well, I'm deeply touched. I can't tell you how much it means to me. I prepared a speech for tonight, but I'm not going to use it. I'm just going to stand here, instead, and tell you, just as the words come out, how I feel." Here he would pause for applause and then continue. "Thank you so very much. Thank you. I know you're all behind me — except for the police agents in the audience." Here he would wait for laughter. "We all know them, don't we? I see about a dozen. A dozen agents have come down here to find out what I'm going to say. Isn't that ridiculous?" Here there would be mixed laughter, applause and cries in the affirmative. "All right! Thank you. I hope they get an earful tonight."

Later in the speech he would demand, "Why are they doing

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this to me? I want you to tell me why. What have I done? What am I accused of doing? Well, I'll tell you this — I'm not the kind of a man who is going to submit meekly to this persecution. I'm going to fight back. I've got a little money left from my lottery winnings, and I'll spend every cent of it to fight these people doing this thing to me." Here he would pause dramatically. "I want to leave you with this point. It's not just Shamar the Worker that's involved. What am I? A poor, itinerant laborer going from town to town. I'm nothing, I have never had anything, and I guess I never will have anything. I'm no rich black marketeer or businessman. I'm no fat politician. I'm just one little man. But it's not me — and this is the point I want to leave you with — it's not Shamar the Worker. He's unimportant. What is important is that if they can do this to me, they can do it to you. If they can do it to Shamar the Worker today, next year one of you will be up here on this platform speaking just the way I am. So you see, this is your fight. It's not me that's important — it's the principle that's important—"

The meeting went brilliantly. Every time he paused, the audience responded just as the speech-writer had indicated. It was as if they were as well rehearsed as he.

The next night, another meeting. And another. And another. He slept no more than four hours a night when the campaign was in full swing. He spoke dozens of times into the bright glare of TV cameras. He paraded down a million streets in an open-topped car. Faces poured in front of his own; on and on they came. People with tears in their eyes cried, "God bless Shamar the Worker!" Once the Committee hired a brass band.

So, for two weeks, it went.

Then the Party threw him back in jail, in an apparent effort to deprive the movement of its momentus.

After three days, during which time Shamar was held incommunicado, Counselor Freemason obtained permission to interview his client.

"We're making marvelous progress! Ge-Ge is turning into a most effective crusader. You should hear her when she cries, 'Give me back my man!' This is a wonderful development for us. It's having the opposite of the intended effect. Von Stutsman has over-reached himself this time. The Party is going to have to back down, and it will cost him dearly."

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"How's the finances?"

"Ge-Ge has given us some advances—"

"How much have you spent?"

"Well, to tell you the truth, I haven't been keeping track closely. Perhaps we've run a little more than we anticipated. The response, you see — "

Shamar returned to his cell wishing Earth's printing presses had worked a little longer.

It took nearly two weeks to arrange for Ge-Ge to visit him. When she arrived, she was nearly on the point of tears.

"Oh, my darling, how I've missed you!"

She brought him up to date on the progress of his case. As Counselor Freemason had reported, his imprisonment merely increased the vigor of his supporters. Now they were at their highest pitch: a pitch which would be difficult to maintain.

"I'm just worried sick," she said. "If the Party can hold out another week or two. I don't want to worry you, Shamar, but I want you to know how you stand. Counselor Freemason says the worst that could happen would be a short prison sentence, no more than a year, for not filing tax forms. We could keep you out on appeal for quite a while."

"Ge-Ge, how much have we spent so far?"

"About three hundred thousand dollars."

"Good God! They'll have it all when they get through! If I ever get back to Earth—"

"I don't care about money, Shamar! I just want you free!"

He took her shoulders. "Ge-Ge, suppose the Party can't afford to back down? Maybe they feel they have to stand firm to prevent a lot of future trouble. And when Freemason gets all the money . . . then what chance will we stand? They might railroad me for years. They'll make an example out of me. Now, are you willing to gamble? Everybody would jump at the chance to vote them out. If we could—"

"Please, Shamar," Ge-Ge said. "All this voting thing you've always been so sold on is all right, I guess — but it just won't work. To begin with, there isn't any way to vote."

"Maybe there is," he said.

Shamar was still in jail the following day when Ge-Ge appeared on the TV program.

PAMDEN had been reluctant to release time to her. PAMDEN was Itra's largest industrial cooperative — Plastics, Agricultural Machinery, Detergents, Electricity and Newsprint — and, being the most efficient, was responsible for operating the TV networks.

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"Good heavens," said the station executive. "Nobody can say we haven't already given you coverage, Miss Germadpoldlt."

"They've ordered you to stop!" she protested.

"They? The Party? Miss Germadpoldlt, do you honestly believe that? Nobody tells a station manager what to program. Believe me. There is no prior censorship whatsoever. But, on the other hand, we can't turn over the TV stations to minority propaganda either."

Ge-Ge argued and pleaded, and in the end the executive sighed wearily. "I think we've been more than fair. But for you — and this is a personal favor, Miss Germadpoldlt, because you are a young and attractive woman — for you, I will phone our program director and see if he can get you on the Noon Interview Show for tomorrow. It gives you the Itra-wide network, which is certainly more than anyone has the right to ask. You'll have ninety seconds to make your case. That's the best I can do."

"Oh, thank you, thank you," Ge-Ge sobbed. "You're so fair and generous." Outside his office she took a deep breath, crossed her fingers and went home to revise her speech. She had only expected sixty.

Ge-Ge arrived at the studio well in advance and was handed over to the makeup department. With deft skill they converted her youth to age and contrived to instill in her face weariness and defeat. Her protests were ignored.

"This is the way you make up for TV," she was told.

They clucked collective tongues in disapproval when they were finished and sent her on her way to a brief chat with the M.C.

The M.C. assured her that she looked divine and hastily scanned her prepared remarks, which had been heavily edited by some anonymous hand in the news department. The M.C. incorporated a few pointless revisions and dispatched the message to the department handling idiot-board material. It was explained that Ge-Ge was to read, word for word, from the electronic prompter.

Ge-Ge watched the program from the wings. When she heard a commercial message in favor of the consumption of a particular variety of candy, her heart ran away with itself. Her courage faltered. But Shamar's face brought it back.

The signal came. She walked into the terrible glare which held up every imperfection to microscopic inspection. She shook hands, turned, and the

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camera closed in, full face. Beyond the camera lay the largest daytime TV audience on Itra. She felt they were examining her pores with minute and critical attention.

She blinked nervously and began to read. "I am here to tell you about Shamar the Worker." That was as far as she went with the prepared text. Before the horrified ears of the auditors in the studio, she plunged into remarks of another kind entirely.

"If you want to do something to help Shamar the Worker, stop buying candy! Don't buy any more candy. If you want to help Shamar the Worker, don't buy any candy until he's free. If you want to help Shamar, please, *please*, don't buy—"

At this point the technicians cut Ge-Ge out and, with profound mistiming, faded in an oleogenous taped message from the candy manufacturer which began, "Friends, everybody likes Red Block candy, and millions buy it every day. Here's why—"

Ge-Ge surveyed the surrounding confusion and walked unmolested from the studio.

When she arrived home, an angry Counselor Freemason was waiting on her doorstep. Inside, she allowed the Counselor to present his case.

This new move, he explained, would have terrible consequences. Shamar's good faith would be prejudiced. One simply did not, with impunity, go outside the law in such matters. There were rules you absolutely *must* play the game by. He washed his hands of all responsibility for her conduct. "I hope to God nothing comes of it," he concluded. "I'm having the Committee prepare a denial of—"

The phone rang at this point, and without asking permission, Counselor Freemason answered it. "Yes? This is Counselor Freemason, go ahead." He listened a moment, said, "They did," in a weary voice and cradled the phone.

He turned to Ge-Ge. "Now we're in for it. That was Pete Freedle from the Committee."

"Well," said Ge-Ge, "I think we'll just wait a few days and see what happens."

A week later, Ge-Ge was still waiting. Counselor Freemason, deprived of finances, was powerless to move. He saw everything crashing in shambles at their feet.

"But are they selling candy?" Ge-Ge asked.

"That's beside the point!" Counselor Freemason cried. "Look here, every crackpot on the planet will get into the act. They don't care about Shamar. All you're going to prove now is that the Party is unpopular.

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Everyone already knows that." He struck his forehead in exasperation.

For two weeks, all was quiet. There were no more rallies for Shamar the Worker. Signs were torn down and destroyed. No bulletins were printed. No word passed over the electronic communications network. The Committee, bankrupt, dissolved in mutual recriminations and bickering, convinced that the cause of civil liberties had been set back one hundred years.

But candy was not selling.

It clogged the distribution channels. It piled up in warehouses. It lay untouched in stores. It grew rancid. Mechanically the factories continued to turn it out.

The Party denied the boycott was having any effect. This did not appease the distributors of candy and the sellers of candy and the producers of candy. Their jobs were at stake. They had payrolls to meet.

The Party stopped production of candy. People suddenly found themselves with no jobs to go to.

The economic system was so tightly controlled and organized that the effect was immediate. There was too little money available to purchase the supplies normally purchased. Suppliers cut back on their factory orders. This further reduced the need for supplies.

At this point, the Party decided that the people would, by heaven, eat candy. The Party Leader himself went on TV to appeal to the patriotism of the people and to order them to resume buying candy. This was a tactical error. But being the idea of the Party Leader himself, who had always crashed headlong into obstacles, none opposed it.

The issue was directly joined. People resented being told that it was their patriotic duty to eat something that all medical opinion held was harmful. Furthermore, people realized that they had somehow stumbled on a fatal flaw in the system, which they could exploit without immediate danger.

They responded by refusing to buy soap.

The people were now in open revolt. At last they had a method for disapproving of things in general.

The economy plummeted. The computers were in a frenzy. Effects of corrective actions were no longer predictable. The Party frantically tried to buy soap and dump it. The people turned to other commodities.

Pressure now mounted from within the Party itself. The Supervisor of PAMDEN saw his

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carefully nurtured empire begin to disintegrate. A massive layoff in Consumer Plastics (badly hit by a running boycott) took with it valuable key personnel. The Supervisor of PAMDEN told the Party Leader himself that he damned well better do something about the situation, and damned soon, too.

The Party Leader himself ordered the release of Shamar the Worker.

But by then no one was interested in Shamar the Worker.

The man came and unlocked Shamar's cell door. Shamar stood up. The guard tossed in Shamar's clothing. "Get dressed." Shamar got dressed. "Come along." Shamar came along.

Shamar had had no word from outside for nearly two months, and it was not until he saw Ge-Ge's face, radiant with joy, that he realized he had won.

"You're free!" she cried excitedly.

Shamar was given back his belt and possessions. As they waited for the Judge to make it official, Shamar asked, "I wonder what will happen now?"

"Nobody knows. Everybody says the Party's out for sure. Individual Party members will try to form a new government, but it's going to have to be radically different. They'll try to keep all they can, but the people will wring them dry for every last concession. Maybe now when they build the factories, they'll stay built and actually produce something."

"For a little while," Shamar said.

"Longer than a little while," Ge-Ge said. "We've got a way to vote now, when things get too bad."

The Judge, in his red robe, came in. They stood respectfully. He looked at them for a long time and said nothing. Finally, he spoke:

"Well, Shamar the Worker, I guess you've got what you want. You pulled down a whole civilization. I hope you're satisfied. What Dream will you give us to replace the Dream you have taken from us?"

His face hardened.

"Shamar the Worker," he said, 'the Party Leader himself has asked us to dismiss the pending charges against you. This I now do. You are free to go."

"Thank you, sir," Shamar said respectfully.

"Shamar the Worker, for your own sake, you better hope that I never see you in my court. You better not get yourself arrested for anything. I will show you no mercy, but justice will be swift and summary. So that you may not rest easily at night, I am

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having some of my very skillful and competent friends check through your background thoroughly. You should hope, very sincerely, that they find nothing. You may go."

Ge-Ge and Shamar stood. The turned in silence. When they were at the door, the Judge called, "Oh, Shamar the Worker!"

He turned, "Yes, sir?"

"Shamar the Worker, I do not like your accent."

Shamar could feel Ge-Ge trembling uncontrollably at his side.

But when they reached the street, they were greeted by headlines announcing that a delegation from the planet Earth had arrived.

VII

The Earth delegation had taken over a suite in the Party Hotel, grandest and most expensive on Itra. Usually it was reserved for high Party members.

Shamar and Ge-Ge presented themselves at the desk. Shamar wrote out a note in English. "Deliver this to the Earthmen," he instructed.

Shamar and Ge-Ge retired to await results. Less than five minutes passed; the bell hop returned. "Sir and Madam," he said respectfully, "come with me."

When he entered the suite, he felt the personality of Shamar the Worker drop from him into memory.

"Captain Shaeffer! Captain Shaeffer! Oh, what a magnificant job! I'm Gene Gibson from the new Department of Extra-Terrestial Affairs. Who's this?"

"This is my fiancee."

"Good heavens, man, you intend to marry a *native*?" The man stepped back, shocked.

Capt. Shaeffer turned to Ge-Ge and performed bilingual introductions.

They moved from the hallway to the sitting room and arranged themselves on the furniture.

"I must say, Captain Shaeffer, that your success on Itra has surpassed our wildest expectations. The first inkling we had was when, out of the blue, as it were, there was your face looking out at us from the TV screen! You should have been there for our celebration that night! You'd been on Itra just a little over two months! You're going down in history as one of the greatest heroes of all time!"

Capt. Shaeffer said, 'I think it would be best if Ge-Ge and I were to board your ship immediately. Her life may be in danger. Some old-line Party men might resent her role in the revolution. Actually, she had more to do with it than I did."

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"Oh, now, I'm sure you must be exaggerating a bit on that, Captain Shaeffer. Her life in danger? Surely, now! Speaking frankly, Captain — and mind you, I have no personal objection at all; this is none of my business. But she is, after all, an *Itraian.* You know these mixed marriages—"

"I don't give a damn what you personally think," Capt. Shaeffer said. "Is that understood once and for all? She goes."

"Of course. I was just — now don't get huffy. Of course she goes. Just as you wish, Captain."

The angry exchange over an unknown but fearfully expected issue caused Ge-Ge to blink back tears.

A week later, Gene Gibson came for the first time to visit them. Capt. Shaeffer inquired as to progress.

"Well, Captain, things are progressing. We are establishing a government which will be more responsive to the will of the people of Itra. We've had several very pleasant, informal chats with the Party Leader, himself. Really a wonderful man. Once he got all the facts — which were kept from him the first time we landed — he strikes me as being quite responsible. I think we may have misjudged him. I'm not too sure but what he isn't just the exact man to head up the new government. We've discussed a few details on trade agreements and, I must say, he's been very reasonable."

Capt. Shaeffer said nothing.

"Yes," Gene Gibson said, "he's really an exceptional individual. A wealth of administrative experience. A fine grasp of practical politics. I don't regard him as a typical Itraian at all. He feels that, with us backing him, we can get this whole mess straightened out in a few months."

"Mess?"

"Well, you must admit, I think, Captain Shaeffer, that you did — well — make negotiations extremely difficult, in view of the, ah, present temper of the populace.

"You see, Earth would like to have a stable and responsible government. A government, that is, which can see larger issues in perspective. Not one which must devote its full time to coping with a group of unpatriotic anarchists running loose in the streets."

"What's he saying?" Ge-Ge asked.

"As it is now," Gene Gibson continued, "we do have several rather difficult problems. I think we'll probably have to quarantine Itra for a few months until the Party Leader himself

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can form a stable organizational structure. Somehow news of our trade discussions have leaked out and for some reason has resulted in a general work stoppage. So you see? By God, I'll just come right out and say it: Shaeffer, you've left us one hell of a mess!"

With that, Gene Gibson departed.

"What did he say?" Ge-Ge asked meekly. But Shaeffer only shook his head.

The following day, the ship's captain came to pay a courtesy call.

"A very neat piece of work, Merle. Your new assignment just came in, by the way, on the space radio."

"New assignment? Ge-Ge and I are on our way back to Earth."

"No, you're not. We're to drop you off at Midway for transhipment to Folger's Hill. It's a new planet. You're to be Earth representative to the people of Folger's Hill. The first shipload of colonists arrived about a month ago."

"I see," Capt. Shaeffer said.

"The salary's good," the ship's captain said.

"Suppose I don't want to go?"

"I've got orders to leave you at Midway. I'd want to go if I were you. They want you out of the way for a little while. You can't fight it. You've been appointed a General in the Defense Forces, so you're now under military law — and it's an order."

At this point, Ge-Ge broke in to say, "How are things going in Xxla?"

General Shaeffer choked back his anger and presented the question.

"They don't tell us anything. The crew is confined to the ship."

Shamar the Worker turned to Ge-Ge. "It's going about the same," he said.

A year later, General Merle S. Shaeffer's card popped out of the computer.

"General Shaeffer's up for reassignment."

"Who in hell is General Shaeffer?"

"Never heard of him."

The card passed upward.

"Merle Shaeffer is due for reassignment," a man who knew the name told the Secretary of the Over Council at lunch the following day. "There's a new planet opened up even further away than Folger's Hill."

"He's the one who butchered the Itra assignment? Send him there. Anything new from Itra recently, by the way?"

"Same as usual. I understand the anarchists have formed some kind of government."

"Terrible. Terrible. Well, the

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less said about that the better."

A week later, again over lunch, the Secretary was told:

"I guess we needn't worry about Merle Shaeffer any more. Disappeared from his post, he and that Itraian woman of his, a couple of weeks after they arrived on Folger's Hill. Probably a hunting accident got them both. Their bodies were never found. These things happen on wild new planets."

The Secretary was silent for a long time. Then he said: "Shaeffer dead, eh? I guess it's better that way. Well, a genius has passed, and we'll not see his like again. Perverted, perhaps, but a genius none the less."

They drank solemnly.

"To Merle Shaeffer. You could call him a hero, so let's you and I drink to that. No one else ever will."

They drank again.

Nothing further served to stir the Secretary's memory of Merle Shaeffer, and he retired six months later at the end of his term. The new Secretary was not familiar with the Itraian affair.

He had been in office just a few days less than a year when, one morning, he arrived at his office in a furious rage. "Get me the Head of the Defense Forces!"

"I'm sorry, sir, all the phones are tied up," his secretary said.

"What in hell do you mean, all the phones are tied up?"

"I don't know. Maybe all at once everybody just left their phones off the hook or something."

"Why would they do that? That's ridiculous! Get a runner over after him."

Half an hour later, the Head of the Defense Forces arrived.

"Do you know," the new Secretary demanded, "that yesterday all the pennies went out of circulation? People apparently have been saving them for the last couple of months. It finally showed up. All at once, there aren't any pennies. You can't make change. Damn it, why would those crazy idiots all decide to save their pennies at the same time? It's not rational. Why did they do it?"

The Head of the Defense Forces said nothing.

The Secretary raved at him in anger, but the Head of the Defense Forces did not have the heart to tell him that a hero had returned home.

— KRIS NEVILLE

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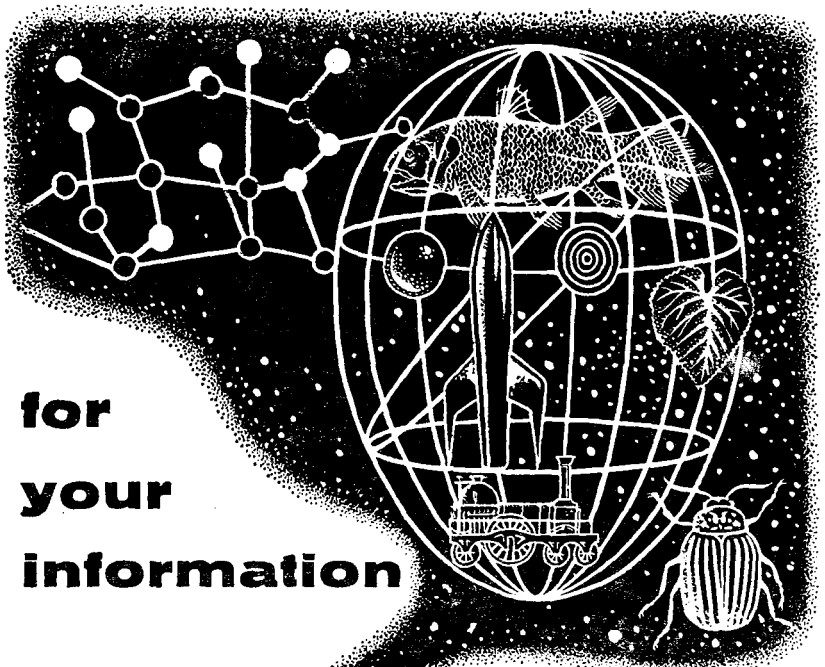

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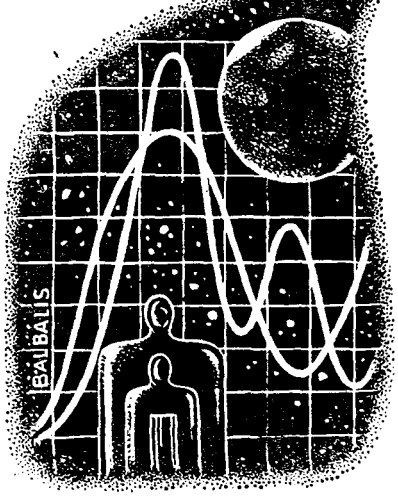

THE EARLY DAYS OF THE METRIC SYSTEM

It may be traditional to divide a length called a foot into twelve inches and then chop up these inches into halves, quarters, etc. Or, going the other way, to say that three feet make one yard (why not four, since the inch gets quartered?) and end

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Comparison of the Pound Avoirdupois and the Foot with other "pounds" and "feet" in 1704.

	Pound	Foot
London	1.000	1.000
Paris	.930	1.068
Amsterdam	.930	.942
Leyden	.960	1.033
Antwerp	.980	.946
Strasbourg	.930	.920
Bremen	.940	.964
Cologne	.970	.954
Frankfurt on the Main	.930	.948
Toledo	1.000	.899

* According to the *Lexicon Technicum* by John Harris.

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up with the interesting figure of 5280 feet to a mile.

It may be equally traditional to say that one shilling contains twelve pence and that twenty shillings make one pound. At least one historian holds that this relationship represents an original relationship of values, namely that one pound of gold was worth twenty pounds of silver while each pound of silver bought twelve pounds of copper.

While these things may be traditional they are also quite impractical. Every individual has had to memorize them at one time in his or her life. On the other hand, it needs no time at all to "memorize" that there are 100 cents in the dollar, or that 1000 millimeters make one meter, and 1000 meters make one kilometer. Since most of the household and workshop arithmetic can be carried out in one's head when using the metric system, but needs paper and pencil when carried out in the inch-foot system, the statement that the metric system will win out eventually does not even deserve the label "prediction".

But how did it start and why?

The "why" begins with the fact that in, say, 1700 there was no system at all.

If this statement makes you think that each country had its own "pound", and "foot" and "mile" you are only partly right. In actual fact, it was not each country, but each province; and sometimes the northern part of a province used one set of measurements while the southern part of the province used another one. And the cities, being rich, were much too proud to use the rural measurements of the surrounding countryside, so they had their own.

The country that was best off in this chaos was England. There one system was used throughout by royal decree. But in France there was no such uniformity; in the northern part of the country alone the pound had twenty-one different values, depending on where you happened to be. As for measures for grain, not less than three hundred different kinds have been compiled by pa-

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tient historians. Their relationships were sometimes simple, as when a city council might decree that the city unit for grain was three of the units of the surrounding countryside.

But sometimes the relationships were anything but simple. In fact they were sometimes so complicated that a mathematician had to be called in, as was the case in 1626 when the council of the City of Ulm called on the great Johannes Kepler to straighten out their measurements. The merchants could never agree on the length of a "shoe" and the question of how much grain constituted a "bucket" often had the result that the suppliers and customers flung actual buckets at each other. Kepler accepted the job for two reasons. One was that the mathematical aspects of the problem intrigued him. The other was that the city paid him.

The final outcome was the "Kettle of Ulm", a metal container which combined all the customary measurements. They were listed on the outside of the kettle in raised letters, even rhyming. The inside diameter of the kettle was one ell, its depth was two shoes, its capacity "one honest bucket". The weight of the kettle, when empty, was 4½ units; when full of water it was 7 units. And now we come to the problem of the grain measure: if you filled the kettle 64 times with grain you had 90 measures!

If one reads that in those days money changers and merchants coped with the endless varieties of silver and of gold coins by just weighing them it looks at first glance as if at least the money changers had found a useful shortcut, based on the fact that a pound of silver is a pound of silver, and a pound of gold is a pound of gold. Well, yes. But which pound? The pound of London, or that of Strasbourg (which was less), or that of Hamburg (which the English then called Hamborough and which was .95 of the London pound), or that of Leipzig, which was 1.15 of the London pound?

No wonder that, in 1704, the Englishman John Harris compiled a book called *Lexicon Technicum* which contained endless tables of how the pound of Calcutta, Rotterdam, etc. compared with that of England; other long tables compared the foot of the various countries. Glancing over these tables now, one sees with a good deal of astonishment that the "Spanish foot" was the same as the English, but the "Toledo foot" was shorter (see Table) while, on the other hand, the Toledo pound was the same as the English.

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(There seems to have been no "Spanish pound.")

But the internal confusion was greatest in France. Many Frenchmen felt that, if the king of England could decree uniform measurements throughout his realm, the king of France should do the same. The French, at the time, had a system of making complaints and suggestions. The documents bore the name of *Cahiers de doleances* (writs of grievances) and they seem to have contained complaints about the lack of uniform measurements almost every year. The earliest known was in a *cahier* of 1576. By about 1785, the government in Paris decided that a reform should be considered. Reading about a two-century interval one is reminded of the famous lines—

> the government,
> the truth to tell,
> did nothing in particular,
> but did it very well!

But it was not just a case of indifference and procrastination. To say that things are confused and that a reform is needed is one thing. Making useful suggestions for a reform is something else. The French government — ultimately the king — seems to have felt that the suggestions were incomplete in themselves. At any event that they were not definite enough to base decrees and laws on them.

The English had taken their measurements from the human body. The "foot" was an actual foot; that is, it was the average of the foot lengths of a dozen grown men, picked at random (or so the story goes). Now it so happened that 36 barleycorns "from the center of an ear" made one foot; therefore the "barleycorn" became the subdivision of an inch, with three barleycorn to the inch. Later on most artisans decided that halving and quartering the inch was easier, so only bootmakers continued to use the barleycorn as the smaller unit — a practice still continued by shoe manufacturers in England and in the United States. A difference of one size means a difference of one barleycorn, or one third of an inch, in length. It also happened that a piece of rope stretched from fingertip to fingertip across the chest of a man (a "fathom") was very closely six feet, and one half of that became a yard.

The official English measurements, then, were based on the human body, and the measures of other areas and cities probably were too. But the French scientists did not wish to follow

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this pattern. The dimensions of the human body were too variable. Basing a set of official measures on the size of the planet Earth was more to their liking, since the size of the planet would not change. That was, of course, true enough; the problem was that the size of the planet was not accurately known.

It is not surprising that the first man to propose using the planet Earth as a standard was an astronomer. He was Jacques Cassini, and for that reason often called Cassini the Second. He suggested in 1720 that the standard foot should be the hundredth part of one second of arc of a meridian. The French Academy thought this a fine and logical suggestion, which only had the one drawback that the various attempts to measure the length of a meridian showed rather poor agreement. About thirty years later another French scientist, the mathematician and astronomer Charles-Marie de la Condamine, came with another suggestion which would be easier to carry out in practice.

Galileo Galilei had been the first to notice that the time required for a pendulum to complete one swing depended on the length of the pendulum. In reality the time required depends on two factors, namely the length of the pendulum and the latitude, but Galileo did not know that. It was suspected by the astronomer Jean Picard that latitude might be a factor involved. But Picard made the general suggestion that a pendulum of a length resulting in a period of one second would be a useful basis for linear measurements.

The length of the seconds pendulum, it may be mentioned at this point, is 39.01 inches, or 99.09 centimeters; this is the standard figure, which requires a correction for the latitude.

To get away from the need for corrections, de la Condamine suggested the length of the seconds pendulum *at the equator* as the unit for linear measurement.

So these were the two suggestions, either a fraction of the length of the meridian, or else the length of the seconds pendulum. But both still had to be determined.

Along with the problem of finding a standard length which would not vary — and which could be re-established in case a catastrophe of some kind destroyed the first standard — there was the problem of subdivision of the standard. Thinking in dozens was customary; as we have seen the foot was divided into a dozen inches or into three dozen barleycorns. But

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the dozen was not the only subunit or super-unit in use. In some places the foot was divided into eighths, and in Germany things like eggs or hard rolls were sold not by the dozen, but by the *Mandel* which was 15 units. To make things worse the Germans had the "peasant's mandel" in addition; it consisted of 16 units. (Remember the "baker's dozen".)

A dozen may be superior to ten because it can be divided by 2, 3, 4 and 6, while ten can only be divided by 2 and 5, but it so happens that we have ten fingers. A division into ten subunits is therefore easier to visualize, at least for the beginner. The man who was the first to advocate subdivision into tenths was the Dutch mathematician Simon Stevin, military engineer to Count Maurits of Nassau. Stevin was not concerned with the measurements themselves or their origin and accuracy; he just advocated subdivision into decimal fractions. In order to find a larger audience he wrote his book twice, once in Latin and once in French. Both versions were printed in Leyden in 1585. The title of the French version was *La Disme*, and the English translation by Robert Norton (published in 1608) was called *Disme: The Art of Tenths, or, Decimall Arithmeticke.*

The word *disme* means "tenth" and is related to "tithe". At one time it was the name of an American coin, the Half Dismes and Dismes between 1792 and 1800, later spelled "dimes".

Apparently Simon Stevin's book in its various editions convinced everyone — with the exception of the Master of the Royal Mint — of the superiority of decimal fractions, for the French Academy decided from the outset that this is what they would use in carrying out the mandate from the National Assembly to create a new system of weights and measures. The National Assembly had recommended the length of the seconds pendulum as a suitable (and repeatable) physical constant, but it had not said anything about decimal fractions.

But while the Academy decided on decimal fractions it also decided that the meridian would be superior to the seconds pendulum as a standard. It recommended in 1791 that the ten millionth part of the distance from the pole to the equator should be the new unit of measurement, the meter. The National Assembly accepted the recommendation. And then the hard work of measuring began.

In the meantime the savants had to fight with words. The unit was to be the meter (in French

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metre) and a tenth of a meter was a decimeter. A tenth of a decimeter, or a hundredth of a meter, was obviously a centimeter. The tenth part of a centimeter was a millimeter — the word means a thousandth of a meter.

Going the other way, a term meaning a thousand meters was needed. The Greek word *chilioi* suggested itself, in spite of two drawbacks. In Greek letters the "ch" was the letter *chi,* which looks like an x. But the letter *chi,* considered as a numeral, meant 600. However, the Greeks themselves had often used the *chi* to mean 1000, as an abbreviation of the word *chilioi.*

One thing somewhat disturbing to Frenchmen was that all classical scholars were agreed that the *chi* was a guttural and Frenchmen, for no better reason that they cannot pronounce them easily, are opposed to gutturals. But somebody saved the day by discovering that the Ionian dialect of Greek used a *kappa* instead of the *chi* — the Ionians apparently were opposed to gutturals too — and the name of the unit of 1000 meters became the kilometer.

Now the unit of linear measure was to be the ten millionth part of the distance from a pole to the equator. This could be determined without much difficulty from the figure provided by Nicolas-Louis de Lacaille, who derived the length of one degree of the meridian under 45 latitude as 57,027 *toises,* each *toise* being six feet Parisian. (Take it from there . . . if you have absolutely nothing else to do.) But the new system also was to include weights, and the unit of weight was to be the weight of a unit volume of distilled water weighed in a vacuum chamber at the temperature of melting ice. The name chosen for this unit was *gravet.*

Later on the unit volume was chosen as one cubic centimeter, and the temperature was shifted from that of melting ice to 4 degrees centigrade because at that temperature water shows its greatest density. Finally the name of this unit weight became *gram,* with kilogram for a thousand of these units and ton (metric ton) for a thousand kilograms.

Everything would have been fine if France had not become a republic in the meantime. Now the work of establishing the new system was under a new commission. Of course it had the name of *Commission temporaire des Poids & Mesures republicains,* the Temporary Commission for Republican Weights and Measures. The system that had been

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meant for everybody in all countries had now become the "System of the Republic", just as they concocted a "Calendar of the Republic" which was finally abandoned by Napoleon to the jubilation of everybody. Whether the French revolutionaries actually intended the new system to be for France only is not quite clear, but the title page of the official book introducing the system sounded as if this were the case.

The title page read (the sign/ indicates that a new line began on the page): *Instruction/sur /Les Mesures/deduites/de la Grandeur de la Terre,/uniformes/Pour Toute la Republique/et/sur les calculs relatifs /a leur division decimale.* In English: Instructions on the Measurements derived from the size of the earth, uniform for the whole republic, with tables in decimal fractions.

With such a title page, the King of England, the King of Prussia, the Czar of all the Russians and every other king or prince could not only suspect that this might not be suitable for his country, he almost had to come to the conclusion that it should be forbidden in his country. As a matter of fact, because of these (purely accidental) political implications the new system made headway very slowly. It made headway slowly in France too. The system became legal in December 1799 and the First Consul of the Republic Napoleon Bonaparte made it compulsory in 1801. But in 1837, several governments later, a law had to be passed imposing fines on recalcitrant silk and wine merchants (among others) who did not use the metric system exclusively beginning January 1, 1840.

By now the metric system is all but universal. The Russians adopted it in 1918, and in the two countries which are still holding out, the British Commonwealth and the United States, it is at least legal. In the United States, as a matter of fact, the yard and pound, etc., are defined in terms of the metric system, so that a housewife buying two yards of fabric is actually buying according to the metric system, though she is not likely to know the fact unless her husband happens to be a lawyer or a scientist.

What opposition to the metric system remains is usually based on invested capital. A factory will say that it has X million dollars invested in non-metric machinery, and even though these machines could be converted it would not do any good, because the raw material, bar stock, etc., comes in non-metric

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dimensions from the rolling mill. And the rolling mill says, of course, that they have X million dollars invested in *their* machinery.

It is an opposition which will slowly dwindle away. But as far as argumentation is concerned it is certainly superior to that of a now forgotten society which existed in 1879 (and for a few years after) in Boston.

The background for this society had been the attempt of Charles Piazzi Smyth, Astronomer Royal for Scotland, to find all kinds of "cosmic secrets" in the Great Pyramid. Assuming that the number of the days of the year had to be hidden in the base line of the Great Pyramid, Piazzi Smyth divided the base line into 365.2422 parts and named the unit thus derived the "pyramid meter". This he then divided into 25 parts to obtain the "pyramid inch", which turned out to be almost the same as the English inch.

Piazzi Smyth quickly concluded that the English inch was just a faintly corrupted "pyramid inch". Hence the English system of measurement by inches really went back to ancient Egypt. By 1870 most of those who played around with the dimensions of the Great Pyramid had also concluded that the pyramid had been divinely inspired in the most literal meaning of the term. Hence the inch was sacred. Hence it was necessary to form a society with the ultimate purpose of outlawing the "atheist metric system". James Abram Garfield, later president of the United States, was an active supporter of this movement against the meter.

The movement did not last long.

Besides, the metric system had been legalized in 1866.

Any Questions?

What are the "lost Messier objects?"

George P. Wallace
Boston, Mass.

In 1771 the French astronomer Charles Messier published the first version of his *Catalogue of Nebulosities*, which was a by-product of Messier's main work —namely the hunting for new comets. Since a comet, before it develops a tail, looks like a fuzzy star, and since Messier knew that there are some objects in the sky which always look that

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way, it was only natural that he compile a catalogue of these objects so that he would not waste observing time on them.

The objects listed in Messier's catalogue are now referred to with numbers preceded by an M. M-1 for example, is the crab nebula, M-13 the globular cluster in Hercules, M-31 the "nebula" (galaxy) in Andromeda. Two objects, namely M-40 and M-91, could not be found by later astronomers and are therefore called the "lost Messier objects". It is believed that they were faint comets which Messier mistook for permanent nebulous objects.

The announcement of the discovery of a third extra-solar planet by Dr. Peter van de Camp prompts me to ask whether there is any chance of actually seeing or at least photographing such planets. I understand that the new extra-solar planet is a dark companion of Barnard's Star, which is itself quite faint, and that its presence was deduced from the examination of minute changes of position of the visible star. While I don't doubt its existence, I think it would be a reason for rejoicing if the deduction could be verified photographically.

J. D. Carbonara
Phoenix, Arizona.

I agree that it would be "reason for rejoicing" if any one of the three extra-solar planets now on record (the earlier two are those of 61 Cygni and of Lalande 2185) could be verified photographically. I could even cite historical precedent. It was Friedrich Wilhelm Bessel who was the first to deduce the existence of a body in space in this manner. He deduced the existence of a Companion of Sirius, and later of a Companion of Procyon, and both were discovered visually at a later date when telescopes had grown larger. But in both cases the companions were dwarf stars — bodies of stellar mass but of planetary dimensions. They are self-luminous.

The three extra-solar planets now known are of planetary mass and planetary dimensions, though quite large. The two bodies accompanying 61 Cygni and Lalande 2185 must have a mass of about one per cent of the mass of our sun, while the "planet" of Barnard's Star has only about one and a half times the mass of the planet Jupiter. It would be most surprising (though not completely impossible) if they were self-luminous.

The question of whether a true planet, visible by reflected light only, could be observed (or just seen) over a distance of several

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light-years has been investigated by several astronomers, e. g., the late Dr. Otto Struve and Dr. Lyman Spitzer. Dr. Spitzer assumed a planet of the same albedo as Jupiter, orbiting its star at the same distance as Jupiter orbits our sun. If that planetary system were 16 light-years distant the maximum separation of star and planet would be one second of arc.

It is easy to make the case seem hopeless by saying that a separation of one second of arc is equal to the diameter of a quarter-dollar coin seen from a distance of three miles. This is quite true, but it is also true that it does not need a very large telescope to see two luminous points which are separated by one second of arc. The crux of the matter is that both points should be of about the same luminosity for easy separation, and a sun and its planet differ enormously in luminosity. If we imagine astronomers 16 light-years away looking for Jupiter, they would find that the sun is approximately 900 million times as luminous as the planet. It is like somebody waving a flashlight next to a battery of searchlights. And if the astronomers of that other planet have to look through an atmosphere the case becomes hopeless.

They could improve their lot by placing their telescope on an atmosphereless satellite and by using an occulting disk which cuts off as much of the light of the star as possible, but will permit most of the light of the planet to pass when it is in a favorable position. Even then they would need a 300-inch telescope. Our time for rejoicing, therefore, won't come until we have a lunar observatory with more powerful instruments than we have on earth right now.

Looking through several Almanacs, I notice that the number of isotopes for the various elements differs from list to list. This, I presume, is the result of new discoveries. The almanacs are for different years. What I would like to know is whether there are elements which have only one isotope.

Herman Howard
Manhattan, Kansas.

If we disregard radioactive isotopes, natural or artificial, there are eighteen elements which have only one *stable* isotope. In alphabetical order they are: Aluminum, Arsenic, Beryllium, Caesium, Cobalt, Fluorine, Gold, Holmium, Iodine, Manganese, Phosphorus, Praseodymium, Rhodium, Scandium, Sodium, Terbium, Thulium and Yttrium.

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The element with the largest number of stable isotopes is Tin which has ten, followed by Cadmium which has eight. The other elements have two or more, but less than eight, stable isotopes. The total number of stable isotopes now known is around 280.

Would you please write a piece on the names of the artificial satellites. What do their names mean?

Marion McNamara
Salem, Ohio

Let me begin with the Russian satellites because there are fewer of them. The first Russian satellite was named *Sputnik,* which is a Russian word compounded from "s" (meaning "with"), "put" (pronounced poot, meaning "road") and the suffix "nik" which makes the word a noun. It therefore means "travel companion". Incidentally, the *Russian* plural is *sputniki.*

The manned capsules are named *Vostok,* which is the Russian word for "East", but the name has historical significance. The first Russian sailing ship which circumnavigated the globe happened to be called *Vostok.* The current series of Russian research satellites is called *Cosmos;* no explanation necessary. The term "Lunik" is an invention of American newspapermen, not a Russian word or designation. The first Russian planetary probe was the only one which had a name. It was called *Metchta,* which can best be translated as "daydream". Since then the Russians have become very matter of fact. Their Mars probe which is now in space is just called "Mars,1".

Our first satellite was named *Explorer* and our first to be fired over the poles was named *Discoverer,* and it has become customary to name satellites in polar orbits Discoverers while the ones in orbits more or less over the equator are named Explorers.

The moon rockets were named Pioneer, and later Ranger while the planetary probes are called Mariner, all three obvious names. But some other names are less obvious. The satellite ANNA has that name because it was a joint project of Army, Navy, NASA and Air Force. The satellite OSO indicated its purpose: Orbiting Solar Observatory. One that is coming up will be named POGO, from Polar Orbiting Geophysical Observatory. As for *Transit,* the name is clear once you know that it is a navigational satellite. The Canadian satellite (fired by a U. S. rocket from Cape Canaveral) is named *Alouette,* which is French for "Skylark".

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The satellite *Syncom* is somewhat more complicated. It means a *com*munications satellite in the *syn*chronous orbit, 22,300 miles above the equator, needing 24 hours to go around the earth once and therefore seemingly hanging motionless over one point of the equator. *Midas* stands for Missile Defense Alarm System and *Samos* for Satellite and Missile Observation System. *Echo* was called that because the inflated balloon produced an echo of radio waves thrown at it, while the weather satellites *Tiros* are Television and Infrared Observation Satellites. The little satellite *Oscar,* for the use of radio "hams", had this name from the initials of Orbital Satellite Carrying Amateur Radio.

Clumsiest name ever was that of Project SCORE back in December, 1958. Its name stood for Satellite Communications by Orbiting Relay Equipment!

Our local newspaper recently printed a release from NASA in which the word "meteoroid" was used. What is a meteoroid? And since I am at it, why are the words "meteorite" and "meteorology" so similar, since they mean such different things?

Elmer Green
Trenton, New Jersey

The best way to answer this question is to proceed historically. The classical Greek word *meteoros* means lofty, or high, while the word *logos* means knowledge. Therefore, when Aristotle wrote a book on weather he called it *Meteorologica* — the knowledge of things which happen high up — and the science of weather and weather forecasting is still called "meteorology."

But Aristotle thought that certain phenomena, say shooting stars, were events in the atmosphere — which, of course, is correct as far as it goes. A shooting star *is* an event taking place in the atmosphere; that it was of astronomical origin was not known in the ancient world. Later stones that had fallen out of the sky were called meteors or meteorites. The two words were used interchangeably at first — they are still so used in several languages — but then English astronomical usage began to make a sharp distinction. A meteorite was the body that could be picked up from the ground, while the flash it made in the sky was the meteor. The term meteoroid is recent, and is meant to designate meteorites still in space, before they have entered the earth's atmosphere.

—WILLY LEY

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OH, TO BE A BLOBEL !

BY PHILIP K. DICK

ILLUSTRATED BY MORROW

The trouble with his wife was, she wasn't—usually—a woman. But . . . he wasn't always a man!

I

He put a twenty-dollar platinum coin into the slot and the analyst, after a pause, lit up. Its eyes shone with sociability. It swiveled about in its chair, picked up a pen and pad of long yellow paper from its desk and said:

"Good morning, sir. You may begin."

"Hello, Doctor Jones. I guess you're not the same Doctor Jones who did the definitive biography of Freud; that was a century ago." He laughed nervously. Being a rather poverty-stricken man he was not accustomed to dealing with the new fully-homeostatic psychoanalysts. "Um," he said, "should I free-associate or give you background material or just what?"

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Dr. Jones said, "Perhaps you could begin by telling me who you are und warum mich—why you have selected me."

"I'm George Munster of catwalk 4, building WEF-395, San Francisco condominium established 1996."

"How do you do, Mr. Munster." Dr. Jones held out its hand, and George Munster shook it. He found the hand to be of a pleasant body-temperature and decidedly soft. The grip, however, was manly.

"You see," Munster said, "I'm an ex-GI, a war veteran. That's how I got my condominium apartment at WEF-395. Veterans' preference."

"Ah yes," Dr. Jones said, ticking faintly as it measured the passage of time. "The war with the Blobels."

"I fought three years in that war," Munster said, nervously smoothing his long, black, thinning hair. "I hated the Blobels and I volunteered. I was only nineteen and I had a good job —but the crusade to clear the Sol System of Blobels came first in my mind."

"Um," Dr. Jones said, ticking and nodding.

George Munster continued, "I fought well. In fact I got two decorations and a battlefield citation. Corporal. That's because I single-handed wiped out an observation satellite full of Blobels; we'll never know exactly how many because of course, being Blobels, they tend to fuse together and unfuse confusingly." He broke off then, feeling emotional. Even remembering and talking about the war was too much for him. He lay back on the couch, lit a cigarette and tried to become calm.

The Blobels had emigrated originally from another star system, probably Proxima. Several thousand years ago they had settled on Mars and on Titan, doing very well at agrarian pursuits. They were developments of the original unicellular amoeba, quite large and with a highly-organized nervous system, but still amoebae, with pseudopodia, reproducing by binary fission, and in the main offensive to Terran settlers.

The war itself had broken out over ecological considerations. It had been the desire of the Foreign Aid Department of the UN to change the atmosphere on Mars, making it more usable for Terran settlers. This change, however, had made it unpalatable for the Blobel colonies already there; hence the squabble.

And, Munster reflected, it was not possible to change *half* the atmosphere of a planet, the Brownian movement being what it was. Within a period of ten

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years the altered atmosphere had diffused throughout the planet, bringing suffering — at least so they alleged—to the Blobels. In retaliation, a Blobel armada approached Terra and put into orbit a series of technically sophisticated satellites designed eventually to alter the atmosphere of Terra. This alteration had never come about, because of course the War Office of the UN had gone into action; the satellites had been detonated by self-instructing missiles . . . and the war was on.

Dr. Jones said, "Are you married, Mr. Munster?"

"No sir," Munster said. "And —" he shuddered—"you'll see why when I've finished telling you. See, Doctor, I'll be frank. I was a Terran spy. That was my task. They gave the job to me because of my bravery in the field, I didn't ask for it."

"I see," Dr. Jones said.

"Do you?" Munster's voice broke. "Do you know what was necessary in those days in order to make a Terran into a successful spy among the Blobels?"

Nodding, Dr. Jones said, "Yes, Mr. Munster. You had to relinquish your human form and assume the form of a Blobel."

Munster said nothing; he clenched and unclenched his fist bitterly. Across from him Dr. Jones ticked.

That evening, back in his small apartment at WEF-395, Munster opened a fifth of Teacher's scotch and sat sipping from a cup, lacking even the energy to get a glass down from the cupboard over the sink.

What had he gotten out of the session with Dr. Jones today? Nothing, as nearly as he could tell. And it had eaten deep into his meager financial resources . . . meager because—

Because for almost twelve hours out of the day he reverted, despite all the efforts of himself and the Veterans' Hospitalization Agency of the UN, to his old wartime Blobel shape. To a formless unicellular-like blob, right in the middle of his own apartment at WEF-395.

His financial resources consisted of a small pension from the War Office. Finding a job was impossible, because as soon as he was hired the strain caused him to revert there on the spot, in plain sight of his new employer and fellow workers.

It did not assist in forming successful work-relationships.

Sure enough, now, at eight in the evening, he felt himself once more beginning to revert. It was an old and familiar experience to him, and he loathed it. Hurriedly, he sipped the last of the cup of scotch, put the cup down on a table . . . and felt himself

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slide together into a homogeneous puddle.

The telephone rang.

"I can't answer," he called to it. The phone's relay picked up his anguished message and conveyed it to the calling party. Now Munster had become a single transparent gelatinous mass in the middle of the rug. He undulated toward the phone — it was still ringing, despite his statement to it, and he felt furious resentment; didn't he have enough troubles already, without having to deal with a ringing phone?

Reaching it, he extended a pseudopodium and snatched the receiver from the hook. With great effort he formed his plastic substance into the semblance of a vocal apparatus, resonating dully. "I'm busy," he resonated in a low booming fashion into the mouthpiece of the phone. "Call later." Call, he thought as he hung up, tomorrow morning. When I've been able to regain my human form.

The apartment was quiet now.

Sighing, Munster flowed back across the carpet to the window, where he rose into a high pillar in order to see the view beyond. There was a light-sensitive spot on his outer surface, and although he did not possess a true lens he was able to appreciate — nostalgically — the blur of San Francisco Bay, the Golden Gate Bridge, the playground for small children which was Alcatraz Island.

Dammit, he thought bitterly. I can't marry; I can't live a genuine human existence, reverting this way to the form the War Office bigshots forced me into back in the war times...

He had not known then, when he accepted the mission, that it would leave this permanent effect. They had assured him it was "only temporary, for the duration," or some such glib phrase. Duration! Munster thought with furious, impotent resentment. It's been *eleven years.*

The psychological problems created for him, the pressure on his psyche, were immense. Hence his visit to Dr. Jones.

Once more the phone rang.

"Okay," Munster said aloud, and flowed laboriously back across the room to it. "You want to talk to me?" he said as he came closer and closer; the trip, for someone in Blobel form, was a long one. "I'll talk to you. You can even turn on the vidscreen and *look* at me." At the phone he snapped the switch which would permit visual communication as well as auditory. "Have a good look," he said, and displayed his amorphous form

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before the scanning tube of the video.

Dr. Jones' voice came, "I'm sorry to bother you at your home, Mr. Munster, especially when you're in this, um, awkward condition." The homeostatic analyst paused. "But I've been devoting time to problem-solving vis-a-vis your condition. I may have at least a partial solution."

"What?" Munster said, taken by surprise. "You mean to imply that medical science can now—"

"No, no," Dr. Jones said hurriedly. "The physical aspects lie out of my domain; you must keep that in mind, Munster. When you consulted me about your problems it was the psychological adjustment that—"

"I'll come right down to your office and talk to you," Munster said. And then he realized that he could not; in his Blobel form it would take him days to undulate all the way across town to Dr. Jones' office. "Jones," he said desperately, "you see the problems I face. I'm stuck here in this apartment every night beginning about eight o'clock and lasting through until almost seven in the morning. I can't even visit you and consult you and get help—"

"Be quiet, Mr. Munster," Dr. Jones interrupted. "I'm trying to tell you something. You're not the only one in this condition. Did you know that?"

Heavily, Munster said, "Sure. In all, eighty-three Terrans were made over into Blobels at one time or another during the war. Of the eighty-three—" he knew the facts by heart — "sixty-one survived and now there's an organization called Veterans of Unnatural Wars of which fifty are members. I'm a member. We meet twice a month, revert in unison..." He started to hang up the phone. So this was what he had gotten for his money, this stale news. "Goodbye, Doctor," he murmured.

Dr. Jones whirred in agitation. "Mr. Munster, I don't mean other Terrans. I've researched this in your behalf, and I discover that according to captured records at the Library of Congress fifteen *Blobels* were formed into pseudo-Terrans to act as spies for *their* side. Do you understand?"

After a moment Munster said, "Not exactly."

"You have a mental block against being helped," Dr. Jones said. "But here's what I want, Munster. You be at my office at eleven in the morning tomorrow. We'll take up the solution to your problem then. Good night."

Wearily, Munster said, "When I'm in my Blobel form my wits

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aren't too keen, Doctor. You'll have to forgive me." He hung up, still puzzled. So there were fifteen Blobels walking around on Titan this moment, doomed to occupy human forms — so what? How did that help him?

Maybe he would find out at eleven tomorrow.

When he strode into Dr. Jones' waiting room he saw, seated in a deep chair in a corner by a lamp, reading a copy of *Fortune,* an exceedingly attractive young woman.

Automatically, Munster found a place to sit from which he could eye her. Stylish dyed-white hair braided down the back of her neck — he took in the sight of her with delight, pretending to read his own copy of *Fortune.* Slender legs, small and delicate elbows. And her sharp, clearly-featured face. The intelligent eyes, the thin, tapered nostrils — a truly lovely girl, he thought. He drank in the sight of her . . . until all at once she raised her head and stared coolly back at him.

"Dull, having to wait," Munster mumbled.

The girl said, "Do you come to Dr. Jones often?"

"No," he admitted. "This is just the second time."

"I've never been here before," the girl said. "I was going to another electronic fully-homeostatic psychoanalyst in Los Angeles and then late yesterday Dr. Bing, my analyst, called me and told me to fly up here and see Dr. Jones this morning. Is this one good?"

"Um," Munster said. "I guess so." We'll see, he thought. That's precisely what we don't know yet.

The inner office door opened and there stood Dr. Jones. "Miss Arrasmith," it said, nodding to the girl. "Mr. Munster." It nodded to George. "Won't you both come in?"

Rising to her feet, Miss Arrasmith said, "Who pays the twenty dollars, then?"

But the analyst was silent; it had turned off.

"I'll pay," Miss Arrasmith said, reaching into her purse.

"No, no," Munster said. "Let me." He got out a twenty-dollar piece and dropped it into the analyst's slot.

At once, Dr. Jones said, "You're a gentleman, Mr. Munster." Smiling, it ushered the two of them into its office. "Be seated, please. Miss Arrasmith, without preamble please allow me to explain your — condition to Mr. Munster." To Munster it said, "Miss Arrasmith is a Blobel."

Munster could only stare at the girl.

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"Obviously," Dr. Jones continued, "presently in human form. This, for her, is the state of involuntary reversion. During the war she operated behind Terran lines, acting for the Blobel War League. She was captured and held, but then the war ended and she was not tried."

"They released me," Miss Arrasmith said in a low, carefully controlled voice. "Still in human form. I stayed here out of shame. I just couldn't go back to Titan and—" Her voice wavered.

"There is great shame attached to this condition," Dr. Jones said, "for any high-caste Blobel."

Nodding, Miss Arrasmith sat clutching a tiny Irish linen handkerchief and trying to look poised. "Correct, Doctor. I did visit Titan to discuss my condition with medical authorities there. After expensive and prolonged therapy with me they were able to induce a return to my natural form for a period of about one-fourth of the time. But the other three-fourths . . . I am as you perceive me now." She ducked her head and touched the handkerchief to her right eye.

"Jeez," Munster protested, "you're lucky! A human form is infinitely superior to a Blobel form. I ought to know. As a Blobel you have to creep along. You're like a big jellyfish, no skeleton to keep you erect. And binary fission — it's lousy, I say really lousy, compared to the Terran form of — you know. Reproduction." He colored.

Dr. Jones ticked and stated, "For a period of about six hours your human forms overlap. And then for about one hour your Blobel forms overlap. So all in all, the two of you possess seven hours out of twenty-four in which you both possess identical forms. In my opinion—" it toyed with its pen and paper — "seven hours is not too bad, if you follow my meaning."

After a moment Miss Arrasmith said, "But Mr. Munster and I are natural enemies."

"That was years ago," Munster said.

"Correct," Dr. Jones agreed. "True, Miss Arrasmith is basically a Blobel and you, Munster, are a Terran. But both of you are outcasts in either civilization. Both of you are stateless and hence gradually suffering a loss of ego-identity. I predict for both of you a gradual deterioration ending finally in severe mental illness. *Unless* you two can develop a rapprochement." The analyst was silent then.

Miss Arrasmith said softly, "I think we're very lucky, Mr. Munster. As Dr. Jones said, we do overlap for seven hours day . . . we can enjoy that time together, no longer in wretched isolation."

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She smiled up hopefully at him, rearranging her coat. Certainly, she had a nice figure; the somewhat low-cut dress gave an ideal clue to that.

Studying her, Munster pondered.

"Give him time," Dr. Jones told Miss Arrasmith. "My analysis of him is that he will see this correctly and do the right thing."

Still rearranging her coat and dabbing at her large, dark eyes, Miss Arrasmith waited.

II

The phone in Dr. Jones' office rang, a number of years later. He answered it in his customary way. "Please, sir or madam, deposit twenty dollars if you wish to speak to me."

A tough male voice on the other end of the line said, "Listen, this is the UN Legal Office and we don't deposit twenty dollars to talk to anybody. So trip that mechanism inside you, Jones."

"Yes, sir," Dr. Jones said, and with his right hand tripped the lever behind his ear that caused him to come on free.

"Back in 2037," the UN legal expert said, "did you advise a couple to marry? A George Munster and a Vivian Arrasmith, now Mrs. Munster?"

"Why yes," Dr. Jones said, after consulting his built-in memory banks.

"Had you investigated the legal ramifications of their issue?"

"Um, well," Dr. Jones said, "that's not my worry."

"You can be arraigned for advising any action contrary to UN law."

"There's no law prohibiting a Blobel and a Terran from marrying."

The UN legal expert said, "All right, Doctor, I'll settle for a look at their case histories."

"Absolutely no," Dr. Jones said. "That would be a breach of ethics."

"We'll get a writ and sequester them, then."

"Go ahead." Dr. Jones reached behind his ear to shut himself off.

"Wait. It may interest you to know that the Munsters now have four children. And, following the Revised Mendelian Law, the offspring comprise a strict one, two, one ratio. One Blobel girl, one hybrid boy, one hybrid girl, one Terran girl. The legal problem arises in that the Blobel Supreme Council claims the pure-blooded Blobel girl as a citizen of Titan and also suggests that one of the two hybrids be donated to the Council's jurisdiction." The UN legal expert explained, "You see, the Mun-

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sters' marriage is breaking up. They're getting divorced and it's sticky finding which laws obtain regarding them and their issue."

"Yes," Dr. Jones admitted, "I would think so. What has caused their marriage to break up?"

"I don't know and don't care. Possibly the fact that both adults rotate daily between being Blobels and Terrans. Maybe the strain got to be too much. If you want to give them psychological advice, consult them. Goodbye." The UN legal expert rang off.

Did I make a mistake, advising them to marry? Dr. Jones asked itself. I wonder if I shouldn't look them up; I owe at least that to them.

Opening the Los Angeles phonebook, it began thumbing through the Ms.

These had been six difficult years for the Munsters.

First George had moved from San Francisco to Los Angeles. He and Vivian had set up their household in a condominium apartment with three instead of two rooms. Vivian, being in Terran form three-fourths of the time, had been able to obtain a job; right out in public she gave jet flight information at the Fifth Los Angeles Airport. George, however—

His pension comprised an amount only one-forth that of his wife's salary and he felt it keenly. To augment it, he had searched for a way of earning money at home. Finally in a magazine he had found this valuable ad:

> MAKE SWIFT PROFITS IN YOUR OWN CONDO! RAISE GIANT BULLFROGS FROM JUPITER, CAPABLE OF EIGHTY-FOOT LEAPS. CAN BE USED IN FROG-RACING (where legal) AND —

So in 2038 he had bought his first pair of frogs imported from Jupiter and had begun raising them for swift profits, right in his own condominium apartment building, in a corner of the basement that Leopold, the partially-homeostatic janitor, let him use gratis.

But in the relatively feeble Terran gravity the frogs were capable of enormous leaps, and the basement proved too small for them; they ricocheted from wall to wall like green pingpong balls and soon died. Obviously it took more than a portion of the basement at QEK-604 Apartments to house a crop of the damned things, George realized.

And then, too, their first child had been born. It had turned out to be pure-blooded Blobel; for twenty-four hours a day it consisted of a gelatinous mass and George found himself waiting in vain for it to switch over

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to a human form, even for a moment.

He faced Vivian defiantly in this matter, during a period when both of them were in human form.

"How can I consider it my child?" he asked her. "It's an alien life form to me." He was discouraged and even horrified. "Dr. Jones should have foreseen this. Maybe it's *your* child — it looks just like you."

Tears filled Vivian's eyes. "You mean that insultingly."

"Damn right I do. We fought you creatures. We used to consider you no better than Portuguese men-o'-war." Gloomily, he put on his coat. "I'm going down to Veterans of Unnatural Wars Headquarters," he informed his wife. "Have a beer with the boys." Shortly he was on his way to join with his old wartime buddies, glad to get out of the apartment house.

VUW Headquarters was a decrepit cement building in downtown Los Angeles, left over from the twentieth century and sadly in need of paint. The VUW had little funds because most of its members were, like George Munster, living on UN pensions. However, there was a pool table and an old 3-D television set and a few dozen tapes of popular music and also a chess set. George generally drank his beer and played chess with his fellow members, either in human form or in Blobel form; this was one place in which both were accepted.

This particular evening he sat with Pete Ruggles, a fellow veteran who also had married a Blobel female, reverting, as Vivian did, to human form.

"Pete, I can't go on. I've got a gelatinous blob for a child. My whole life I've wanted a kid, and now what have I got? Something that looks like it washed up on the beach."

Sipping his beer — he too was in human form at the moment — Pete answered, "Criminy, George, I admit it's a mess. But you must have known what you were getting into when you married her. And my God, according to Mendel's Revised Law, the next kid—"

George broke in, "I mean I don't respect my own wife. That's the basis of it. I think of her as a *thing*. And myself, too. We're both things." He drank down his beer in one gulp.

Pete said meditatively, "But from the Blobel standpoint—"

"Listen, whose side are you on?" George demanded.

"Don't yell at me," Pete said, "or I'll deck you."

A moment later they were swinging wildly at each other. Fortunately Pete reverted to Blo-

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bel form in the nick of time; no harm was done. Now George sat alone, in human shape, while Pete oozed off somewhere else, probably to join a group of the boys who had also assumed Blobel form.

Maybe we can found a new society somewhere on a remote moon, George said to himself. Neither Terran nor Blobel.

I've got to go back to Vivian, George resolved. What else is there for me? I'm lucky to find her; I'd be nothing but a war veteran guzzling beer here at VUW Headquarters every damn day and night, with no future, no hope, no real life...

He had a new money-making scheme going now. It was a home mail-order business; he had placed an ad in the *Saturday Evening Post* for MAGIC LODESTONES REPUTED TO BRING YOU LUCK. FROM ANOTHER STAR-SYSTEM ENTIRELY! The stones had come from Proxima and were obtainable on Titan; it was Vivian who had made the commercial contact for him with her people. But so far, few people had sent in the dollar-fifty.

I'm a failure, George said to himself.

Fortunately the next child, born in the winter of 2039, showed itself to be a hybrid. It took human form fifty per cent of the time, and so at last George had a child who was — occasionally, anyhow — a member of his own species.

He was still in the process of celebrating the birth of Maurice when a delegation of their neighbors at QEK-604 Apartments came and rapped on their door.

"We've got a petition here," the chairman of the delegation said, shuffling his feet in embarrassment, "asking that you and Mrs. Munster leave QEK-604."

"But why?" George asked, bewildered. "You haven't objected to us up until now."

"The reason is that now you've got a hybrid youngster who will want to play with ours, and we feel it's unhealthy for our kids to—"

George slammed the door in their faces.

But still he felt the pressure of the hostility from the people on all sides of them. And to think, he thought bitterly, that I fought in the war to save these people! It sure wasn't worth it!

An hour later he was down at VUW Headquarters once more, drinking beer and talking with his buddy Sherman Downs, also married to a Blobel.

"Sherman, it's no good. We're not wanted; we've got to emigrate. Maybe we'll try it on Titan in Viv's world."

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"Chrissakes," Sherman protested, "I hate to see you fold up, George. Isn't your electro-magnetic reducing belt beginning to sell, finally?"

For the last few months, George had been making and selling a complex electronic reducing gadget which Vivian had helped him design; it was based in principle on a Blobel device popular on Titan but unknown on Terra. And this had gone over well. George had more orders than he could fill. But—

"I had a terrible experience, Sherm," George confided. "I was in a drugstore the other day, and they gave me a big order for my reducing belt, and I got so excited—" He broke off. "You can guess what happened. I reverted, right in plain sight of a hundred customers. And when the buyer saw that he canceled the order for the belts. It was what we all fear. You should have seen how their attitude toward me changed."

Sherm said, "Hire someone to do your selling for you. A full-blooded Terran."

Thickly, George said, "*I'm* a full-blooded Terran, and don't you forget it. Ever."

"I just mean—"

"I know what you meant," George said. And took a swing at Sherman. Fortunately he missed and in the excitement both of them reverted to Blobel form. They oozed angrily into each other for a time, but at last fellow veterans managed to separate them.

"I'm as much a Terran as anyone," George thought-radiated in the Blobel manner to Sherman. "And I'll flatten anyone who says otherwise."

In Blobel form he was unable to get home; he had to phone Vivian to come and get him. It was humiliating.

Suicide, he decided. That's the answer.

How best to do it? In Blobel form he was unable to feel pain; best to do it then. Several substances would dissolve him . . . he could, for instance, drop himself into a heavily-chlorinated swimming pool, such as QEK-604 maintained in its recreation room.

Vivian, in human form, found him as he reposed hesitantly at the edge of the swimming pool, late one night.

"George, I beg you — go back to Dr. Jones."

"Naw," he boomed dully, forming a quasi-vocal apparatus with a portion of his body. "It's no use, Viv. I don't *want* to go on." Even the belts; they had been Viv's idea, rather than his. He was second even there . . . behind her, falling constantly further behind each passing day.

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Viv said, "You have so much to offer the children."

That was true. "Maybe I'll drop over to the UN War Office," he decided. "Talk to them, see if there's anything new that medical science has come up with that might stabilize me."

"But if you stabilize as a Terran," Vivian said, "what would become of me?"

"We'd have *eighteen entire hours* together a day. All the hours you take human form!"

"But you wouldn't want to stay married to me. Because, George, then you could meet a Terran woman."

It wasn't fair to her, he realized. So he abandoned the idea.

In the spring of 2041 their third child was born, also a girl, and like Maurice a hybrid. It was Blobel at night and Terran by day.

Meanwhile, George found a solution to some of his problems.

He got himself a mistress.

III

At the Hotel Elysium, a rundown wooden building in the heart of Los Angeles, he and Nina arranged to meet one another.

"Nina," George said, sipping Teacher's scotch and seated beside her on the shabby sofa which the hotel provided, "you've made my life worth living again." He fooled with the buttons of her blouse.

"I respect you," Nina Glaubman said, assisting him with the buttons. "In spite of the fact — well, you are a former enemy of the people."

George protested, "We must not think about the old days. We have to close our minds to our pasts." Nothing but our future, he thought.

His reducing belt enterprise had developed so well that now he employed fifteen full-time Terran employees and owned a small, modern factory on the outskirts of San Fernando. If UN taxes had been reasonable he would by now be a wealthy man. Brooding on that, George wondered what the tax rate was in Blobel-run lands, on Io, for instance. Maybe he ought to look into it.

One night at VUW Headquarters he discussed the subject with Reinholt, Nina's husband, who of course was ignorant of the modus vivendi between George and Nina.

"Reinholt," George said with difficulty, as he drank his beer, "I've got big plans. This cradle-to-grave socialism the UN operates . . . it's not for me. It's cramping me. The Munster Magic Magnetic Belt is—" he gestured — "more than Terran civ-

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ilization can support. You get me?"

Coldly, Reinholt said, "But George, you are a Terran. If you emigrate to Blobel-run territory with your factory you'll be be-aying your—"

"Listen," George told him, "I've got one authentic Blobel child, two half-Blobel children, and a fourth on the way. I've got strong *emotional* ties with those people out there on Titan and Io."

"You're a traitor," Reinholt said, and punched him in the mouth. "And not only that," he continued, punching George in the stomach, "you're running around with my wife. I'm going to kill you."

To escape, George reverted to Blobel form; Reinholt's blows passed harmlessly deep into his moist, jelly-like substance. Reinholt then reverted, too, and flowed into him murderously, trying to consume and absorb George's nucleus.

Fortunately fellow veterans pried their two bodies apart before any permanent harm was done.

Later that night, still trembling, George sat with Vivian in the living room of their eight-room suite at the great new condominium apartment building ZGF-900. It had been a close call, and now of course Reinholt would tell Viv. It was only a question of time. The marriage, as far as George could see, was over. This perhaps was their last moment together.

"Viv," he said urgently, "you have to believe me; I love you. You and the children — plus the belt business, naturally — are my complete life." A desperate idea came to him. "Let's emigrate now, tonight. Pack up the kids and go to Titan, right this minute."

"I can't go," Vivian said. "I know how my people would treat me, and treat you and the children, too. George, *you* go. Move the factory to Io. I'll stay here." Tears filled her dark eyes.

"Hell," George said, "what kind of life is that? With you on Terra and me on Io — that's no marriage. And who'll get the kids?" Probably Viv would get them. But his firm employed top legal talent — perhaps he could use it to solve his domestic problems.

The next morning Vivian found out about Nina. And hired an attorney of her own.

"Listen," George said, on the phone talking to his top legal talent, Henry Ramarau. "Get me custody of the fourth child; it'll be a Terran. And we'll compromise on the two hybrids; I'll take Maurice and

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she can have Kathy. And naturally she gets that blob, that first so-called child. As far as I'm concerned it's hers anyhow." He slammed the receiver down and then turned to the board of directors of his company. "Now where were we in our analysis of Io tax laws?"

During the next weeks the idea of a move to Io appeared more and more feasible from a profit and loss standpoint.

"Go ahead and buy land on Io," George instructed his business agent in the field, Tom Hendricks. "And get it cheap. We want to start right." To his secretary Miss Nolan he said, "Now keep everyone out of my office until further notice. I feel an attack coming on, from anxiety over this major move off Terra to Io." He added, "And personal worries."

"Yes, Mr. Munster," Miss Nolan said, ushering Tom Hendricks out of George's private office. "No one will disturb you." She could be counted on to keep everyone out while George reverted to his war-time Blobel shape, as he often did these days. The pressure on him was immense.

When, later in the day, he resumed human form, George learned from Miss Nolan that a Doctor Jones had called.

"I'll be damned," George said, thinking back to six years ago. "I thought it'd be in the junk pile by now." To Miss Nolan he said, "Call Doctor Jones and notify me when you have it. I'll take a minute off to talk to it." It was like old times, back in San Francisco.

Shortly Miss Nolan had Dr. Jones on the line.

"Doctor," George said, leaning from side to side and poking at an orchid on his desk. "Good to hear from you."

The voice of the homeostatic analyst came in his ear, "Mr. Munster, I note that you now have a secretary."

"Yes," George said, "I'm a tycoon. I'm in the reducing belt game; it's somewhat like the flea-collar that cats wear. Well, what can I do for you?"

"I understand you have four children now—"

"Actually three, plus a fourth on the way. Listen, that fourth, Doctor, is vital to me; according to Mendel's Revised Law it's a full-blooded Terran and by God I'm doing everything in my power to get custody of it." He added, "Vivian — you remember her — is now back on Titan. Among her own people, where she belongs. And I'm putting some of the finest doctors I can get on my payroll to stabilize me. I'm tired of this constant reverting, night and day; I've got

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too much to do for such nonsense."

Dr. Jones said, "From your tone I can see you're an important, busy man, Mr. Munster. You've certainly risen in the world since I saw you last."

"Get to the point, Doctor," George said impatiently.

"I, um, thought perhaps I could bring you and Vivian together again."

"Bah," George said contemptuously. "That woman? Never. Listen, Doctor, I have to ring off. We're in the process of finalizing on some basic business strategy, here at Munster, Incorporated."

"Mr. Munster," Dr. Jones asked, "is there another woman?"

"There's another Blobel," George said, "if that's what you mean." And he hung up the phone. Two Blobels are better than none, he said to himself. And now back to business. He pressed a button his desk and at once Miss Nolan put her head into the office. "Miss Nolan," George said, "get me Hank Ramarau; I want to find out—"

"Mr. Ramarau is waiting on the other line," Miss Nolan said. "He says it's urgent."

Switching to the other line, George said, "Hi, Hank. What's up?"

"I've just discovered," his top legal advisor said, "that to operate your factory on Io you must be a citizen of Titan."

"We ought to be able to fix that up," George said.

"But to be a citizen of Titan —" Ramarau hesitated. "I'll break it to you as easy as I can, George. You have to be a Blobel!"

"Dammit, I am a Blobel!" George said. "At least part of the time. Won't that do?"

"No," Ramarau said, "I checked into that, knowing of your affliction, and it's got to be one hundred per cent of the time. Night *and* day."

"Hmmm," George said. "This is bad. But we'll overcome it somehow. Listen, Hank, I've got an appointment with Eddy Fullbright, my medical coordinator. I'll talk to you after, okay?" He ran off and then sat scowling and rubbing his jaw. Well, he decided, if it has to be. Facts are facts, and we can't let them stand in our way.

Picking up the phone he dialed his doctor, Eddy Fullbright.

IV

The twenty-dollar platinum coin rolled down the chute and tripped the circuit. Dr. Jones came on, glanced up and saw a stunning, sharp-breasted young woman whom it recognized by means of a quick scan

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of its memory banks as Mrs. George Munster, the former Vivian Arrasmith.

"Good day, Vivian," Dr. Jones said cordially. "But I understood you were on Titan." It rose to its feet, offering her a chair.

Dabbing at her large, dark eyes, Vivian sniffled, "Doctor, everything is collapsing around me. My husband is having an affair with another woman . . . all I know is that her name is Nina and all the boys down at VUW Headquarters are talking about it. Presumably she's a Terran. We're both filing for divorce. And we're having a dreadful legal battle over the children." She arranged her coat modestly. "I'm expecting. Our fourth."

"This I know," Dr. Jones said. "A full-blooded Terran this time, if Mendel's Law holds . . . although I thought it only applied to litters."

Mrs. Munster said miserably, "I've been on Titan talking to legal and medical experts, gynecologists and especially marital guidance counselors. I've had all sorts of advice during the past month. Now I'm back on Terra but I can't find George — he's *gone*."

"I wish I could help you, Vivian," Dr. Jones said. "I talked to your husband briefly the other day, but he spoke only in generalities. Evidently he's such a big tycoon now that it's hard to approach him."

"And to think," Vivian sniffled, "that he achieved it all because of an idea *I* gave him. A Blobel idea."

"The ironies of fate," Dr. Jones said. "Now, if you want to keep your husband, Vivian—"

"I'm determined to keep him, Doctor Jones. Frankly I've undergone therapy on Titan, the latest and most expensive . . . it's because I love George so much, even more than I love my own people or my planet."

"Eh?" Dr. Jones said.

"Through the most modern developments in medical science in the Sol System," Vivian said, "I've been stabilized, Doctor Jones. Now I am in human form twenty-four hours a day instead of eighteen. I've renounced my natural form in order to keep my marriage with George."

"The supreme sacrifice," Dr. Jones said, touched.

"Now, if I can only *find* him, Doctor—"

At the ground-breaking ceremonies on Io, George Munster flowed gradually to the shovel, extended a pseudopodium, seized the shovel, and with it managed to dig a symbolic amount of soil. "This is a great day," he boomed hollowly, by

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means of the semblance of a vocal apparatus into which he had fashioned the slimy, plastic substance which made up his unicellular body.

"Right, George," Hank Ramarau agreed, standing nearby with the legal documents.

The Ionan official, like George a great transparent blob, oozed across to Ramarau, took the documents and boomed, "These will be transmitted to my government. I'm sure they're in order, Mr. Ramarau."

"I guarantee you," Ramarau said to the official, "Mr. Munster does not revert to human form at any time. He's made use of some of the most advanced techniques in medical science to achieve this stability at the unicellular phase of his former rotation. Munster would never cheat."

"This historic moment," the great blob that was George Munster thought-radiated to the throng of local Blobels attending the ceremonies, "means a higher standard of living for Ionans who will be employed. It will bring prosperity to this area, plus a proud sense of national achievement in the manufacture of what we recognize to be a native invention, the Munster Magic Magnetic Belt."

The throng of Blobels thought-radiated cheers.

"This is a proud day in my life," George Munster informed them, and began to ooze by degrees back to his car, where his chauffeur waited to drive him to his permanent hotel room at Io City.

Someday he would own the hotel. He was putting the profits from his business in local real estate. It was the patriotic — and the profitable — thing to do, other Ionans, other Blobels, had told him.

"I'm finally a successful man," George Munster thought-radiated to all close enough to pick up his emanations.

Amid frenzied cheers he oozed up the ramp and into his Titan-made car.

— PHILIP K. DICK

TWO by Jack Williamson

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THE AWAKENING

BY JACK SHARKEY

They awoke after ages of hiding —to emerge into a world richer than they had dared to dream of!

Rik's first impressions were an uncomfortable chill creeping along his bare flesh, and a bright milky swirling of light that encompassed his entire vision. He shivered and blinked his eyes a few times, and then the swirling settled down and became the vault. The chill, he realized, was due to the body warmth being methodically sucked away by the cold slab on which he lay. Another shiver brought a gasp of breath into his lungs, and then he was wide awake.

When he sat up and swung his legs over the side, the interior of the vault began swirling again. He had to grip the edge of the slab to keep from falling. The air was humid, much too humid, and he could taste the prickly presence of carbon dioxide when he breathed. "The pump," he mumbled, dropping to the floor on feet that he could barely control. "Something's happened to the pump."

He pushed himself determinedly erect, then stumbled

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down the long corridor between the other slabs, hardly glancing at their silent tenants, until he got to Zina's. She lay still as death, not flicking so much as an eyelid, and her flesh was like frozen wax beneath his exploring fingers.

There was nothing he could do for her until he got the pump working again...

Rik pushed away from the slab on which Zina lay, and went through the archway into the next chamber. Here another fifty of the group lay on their slabs, not so much as a muscle twitch betraying the fact that they were all quite alive. It seemed only a few hours since he had lain down on his slab in the other room and gotten his injection, but he could not, for a dizzy moment, recall in which direction the pump lay. His mind seemed to be plumbing dust-covered depths to dredge out his memories, one by one.

He suddenly remembered the War. The war that had driven the group to build this place, to try and safeguard a handful from the holocaust that would set fire to the surface of the world and turn the seas to steam. Was it possible the war had passed? Or had it ever come!

There was no way to know without going outside — Wait! There was! Rik thought hard, trying to get his sense of direction back. The atom-powered clock that marked off months instead of minutes was in the central vault, where the elders slept. The other nine vaults ringed that one, he recalled, veering at right angles to his first direction, which would have taken him on a circular tour of the nine vaults and back to his starting place again.

The archway to the vault of the elders was unaccountably blocked, and Rik realized suddenly that part of the ceiling there had fallen, carried by some fault in the granite of the mountain itself. But that was impossible! The elders had selected this site on the basis of the rigidity of the rocky strata that made it up. A fault could not have occurred for more years than Rik's own lifetime—

Or had that many years passed already?

There was no way of knowing; not until he had examined the clock. Rik moved away from the blockade and made his way into the next vault, and the next, finally finding an archway in the sixth vault from his own where the rock had not completely sealed the way into the elders' vault.

Here he had expected to find the air fresher, already having

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theorized that the staleness elsewhere was due to the poor circulation occasioned by the blockaded central vault. But in fact the air there was even worse, and laden with an odor that made Rik suddenly afraid to see its source.

Still, he was the first to awake. It was up to him to try and save himself and the others. Rik made an effort of will, and then squeezed through the narrow orifice into the main chamber. He looked once toward the slabs holding the bodies of the elders, then quickly away. It was true. All were in advanced stages of corruption already.

Choking, Rik went to the center of the high room and looked into the horizontal face of the clock. The broad indicator arm was at its utmost numeral, and was pocked with rust. They'd lain here beyond the time-of-awakening by at least four times the years they'd planned!

"It can't be right," Rik gasped, his brain reeling for want of clean, cool air. "The mechanism has failed somehow." Afraid to think about it, he tilted the clock up on its base until the pedestal which supported it lay on its side upon the floor. The square block of metal that based the pedestal was now uptilted beyond the vertical, exposing a gaping trap in the floor. Rik did not like the tarnished look of the metal underside of the pedestal-base, forged of an alloy supposed to be incorruptible. A sick thought took hold of his insides then, as he placed one foot upon the rocky staircase under the floor. The clock-indicator had halted at its utmost numeral.

But what if they'd lain here even longer than that? There would be no way of knowing. No way at all.

He descended the staircase swiftly then, glad at least that the air was better down in the pump chamber. "It would be, of course," he reminded himself, "if the pump went off, even. This air would never be circulated, never have its chance to become corrupt with our exhalations." And then his musing was halted in midthought as he came upon the pump. Or upon what had been the pump.

Where rigid cylinders of gleaming metal had been, a few jagged teeth of brown corruption lay in a circle. The pistons were no better, though their thickness had preserved more of their original shape despite the inroads of age, so they could be recognized for what they were — had been. The central shaft was a long mound of flaking dust on the floor between the path of the pistons, and the wall-sized

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mass of the filters — woven of metal and powerful synthetic fibers — crumbled beneath the pressure of his finger.

He sought and found the ponderous casing in which the engine-empowering radioactive element had lain, and its thick walls tore away like wood pulp in his hands. The element, when he found it, was already become cold grey lead. And it had had a half-life of centuries...

Rik crumpled slowly to the floor, shutting his eyes, trying not to think of the eons which must have passed while they all lay sleeping the pseudodeath in the vaults. What might the world have become in the interim!

A current of cool air suddenly touched his face. His head came up instantly, his eyes seeking the source.

A feathery motion of torn edges in the filter showed him that it came through the gap he had torn there. Rik sprang to his feet then, leaped at the filter and tore out chunks by the armful, letting the pulverized material float in spinning clouds of dust motes behind him. The air grew stronger, came faster, as he ripped away the corruption, and then he could see the tunnel beyond.

Gasping at the effort — how long since he had eaten? — he staggered back from the opening then back up the stairs into the chamber of the elders. Now that his nostrils had been stimulated by the clean air the smell of corruption was violently repelling; but he held his breath and ran to the gap in the tumbled rock about the archway, and squeezed his way into the area of subsidiary vaults.

Without the pump in operation, the air could not circulate to this point, but he hoped to drag some of his companions down to the torn filter and revive them — then, with their help, bring the others.

It would be all right. They would be saved, as planned. He regretted the loss of the elders. But no matter. They were but the rulers. He and the others were the chemists, the scientists, the engineers. New elderships could be created when they had become settled again, and could rebuild their civilization.

He went to Zina's slab first. She would not be as much help as some of the others, but Zina and he were too close for him to delay her revival any longer. Life was not worth having without Zina. He carried her out of the vault, through the gap and thick miasma of corruption, then down into the pump chamber. Leaving her lying on her back, with the breeze ruffling her hair

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about her face, Rik went back up for the next person.

Three exhausting trips later, he sat among the bodies of his friends, listening with joy to their returning quiver of breath and life. Zina was the first to open her eyes. She seemed startled to find she was no longer on the slab, and then joyous when her glance fell upon his eager face.

"We've done it!" she sighed. "We came through!" She tried to sit up, then lay down heavily. "Rik — I'm so weak. . ."

"We need food, all of us," he said. "I'm weak myself." He arose from his crouch at her side and stared down the tunnel to the outer world. "I don't know what it's like out there," he said. "There may be no food at all. If the War was as devastating as predicted, it may be barren rock, burning sun and overall death."

"How long — ?" Zina began, and then her eyes fell upon the time-rotted hulk of the pump and she stopped, her face going pale. "As long as that!" she whispered. "Oh, Rik! Do you think — ?"

"I'll know when I've looked," he said. Their eyes met for a long, silent moment, then he turned and started up the tunnel.

Three hundred strides brought him to the barrier, the thinly perforated shield of rock that had been left intact to hide the location of the vaults from their enemies. Rik put his shoulder to the shell. It cracked and fell away as he'd thought it would, with weather and erosion having weakened it for centuries. Bright yellow moonlight lay all about the land outside. Incredibly fine sand was everywhere, but a smell of fresh water and green growing things was mingled with the night air. The region had not been desert when the vaults were constructed. The War had left its mark of devastation here, Rik saw, looking in vain for a trace of the magnificent towered city that had once been just beyond this spot.

He shook off his dismay and set himself to the task for which he'd emerged.

The animals had to be alive, yet, or they were doomed. He'd always regretted the haste in their preparations that had precluded preparing survival vaults for the food animals. The best they'd been able to do, before the Day of Devastation, was herd the stupid beasts into caves and pile the entrances with loose rock, hoping the animals would dig themselves out only after the worst fury of the War had passed. . . Rik threw off the bitter memory, abruptly, as his ears detected a tiny buzz of sound.

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He dropped to the ground and lay still, watching to see what sort of beast would appear. It sounded larger than the animals he remembered. "I must be near a waterhole," he reasoned. "There's a pathway here, made by many animals passing this way. . ." he mused, studying the narrow, flattened track that he'd spotted in the night-chilled sand.

Then he saw something coming slowly up the trail, a thing much larger than the animals he remembered.

It was a long moment before he realized what it was, and smiled. Then he reached out his hands and had it. It buzzed loudly in his grip until he pounded it to silence on a rock. By the time he'd returned to the pump chamber, he'd managed to prise it open, but its contents — mangled by the smashing upon the rock — were barely fit to eat.

"It's better than I could have hoped," he said to Zina, when they and the others had picked the thing clean. "Life promises to be much more exciting, infinitely more sporting in this new age outside the vaults. With care, we can survive until our engineers rig up some whip-rays and herding-claws again."

"It *will* be fun," Zina agreed, smiling with grim anticipation. "I enjoy a challenge in the hunt. Who'd have thought the animals would have come so *far* from the caves!"

It was hours later that the bus company grew worried about their missing vehicle, and started an investigation. But they could find no trace of the bus, anywhere, and it remained a mystery until the day everybody suddenly knew what had happened.

But that was far too late.

— JACK SHARKEY

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THE STAR KING

Two were human. The third was a fearsome alien creature. Gersen gambled his life to decide which!

BY JACK VANCE

CONCLUSION

Synopsis

Gersen was a dedicated man.

As a child he had seen his family wiped out in the attack of a Star King, a human-seeming creature totally without morals or compassion. Gersen had been bred and trained ever since for one purpose: revenge. After decades of growing and learning he was at last on the track of the being who had ravaged his home. The trail began on a lonely outpost planet where a desperate space explorer, doomed to death, told him of a wonderful virgin world he had sighted . . . and told him that the Star King was intent on owning the planet for himself.

Gersen stole the dying explorer's coded control filament, which would enable him to locate the virgin planet. Tracking down the

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Illustrated by EMSH

names of the men who had sponsored the explorer, Gersen found three persons, Kelle, Detteras and Warweave, all seeming solid citizens with a philanthropic interest in space exploration . . . but one of whom was a monster

Gersen was certain he was on the right track when Sarkoy assassins tried to waylay him. Born and bred to kill in a thousand ways, they were yet no match for Gersen, whose whole life had been devoted to countermeasures for any such attack. He made arrangements to interview the three men, one of whom was his enemy, and in the process met a girl, Pallis Atwrode, who touched the first human spark Gersen had felt in his whole life.

There had been no others.

In training himself to combat a monster, Gersen discovered he had become almost a sort of monster himself.

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VII

Deeming the unsubstantiated dogma of a localized religious cult to be an undignified and unsuitable base on which to erect the chronology of galactic man, the members of this convention hereby declare that time shall now be reckoned from the year 2000 A.D. (Old System), which becomes the year 0. The revolution of Earth about Sol remains the standard annual unit.

— Declaration at the Oikumenical Convention to Standardize measures.

"Everything of which we are conscious . . . has for us a deeper meaning still, a final meaning. And the one and only means of rendering this incomprehensible comprehensible must be a kind of metaphysics which regards *everything whatsoever* as having significance as a symbol."

— Oswald Spengler.

"Who are our basic enemies? This is a secret, unknown even to these basic enemies."

— Xaviar Skolcamp, Over-Centennial Fellow of the Institute, indulgently, in response to a journalist's too-searching question.

Kagge Kelle was a small compact man with a large solid well-arranged head. His skin was only faintly dyed, to a waxy bisque pallor; he wore a severe costume of dark brown and purple. His eyes were clear and remote, his nose was short and blunt, his mouth prim, held firmly as if in compensation for its over-fullness.

Kelle seemed to make a virtue of inscrutability. He greeted Gersen with austere courtesy, listened to his story without comment, saw the photographs without perceptible show of interest. Choosing his words with care, he said, "I am sorry that I cannot help you. I did not sponsor Mr. Teehalt's expedition. I know nothing about this man."

"In that case, will you allow me the use of the decoding strip?"

Kelle sat motionless a moment. Then he said in an even voice, "Unfortunately this is contrary to the rules of the department. I would encounter not a little criticism. Still. . ." He picked up the photographs and examined them once more. "This is beyond question a world of interesting characteristics. What is its name?"

"I don't have that information, Mr. Kelle."

"I cannot conceive why you seek Teehalt's sponsor. Are you

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a representative of the IPCC?"

"I am a private individual, though naturally I can't demonstrate this."

Kelle was skeptical. "Everyone works to his own interests. If I understood what you were trying to achieve, I could possibly act with more flexibility."

"This is more or less what Mr. Warweave told me," said Gersen.

Kelle turned him a sharp look. "Neither Warweave nor myself are what might be called innocent men." He thought a moment, then said grudgingly, "On behalf of the department, I can go so far as to make you an offer for the filament — though, as you tell the story, it actually is the property of the department to begin with."

Gersen nodded in full agreement. "This is exactly the point I am trying to establish. Does the filament actually belong to the university, or can I feel free to do as I like with it? If I could find Lugo Teehalt's sponsor — or determine whether the sponsor actually exists — then any number of new possibilities would appear."

Kelle was not to be moved by Gersen's ingenuousness. "It is an extraordinary situation . . . As I say, I might be able to make you an attractive offer for the filament — even as a private party, if that would expedite matters. Although I would naturally insist on a prior inspection of the planet."

"You know my qualms in the matter, Mr. Kelle."

Kelle's response was only a small incredulous smile. Once more he studied the photographs. "These — er — dryads, I must say they are creatures of considerable interest. . . Well, I can help you to this extent. I will consult university records for information regarding Lugo Teehalt. But in exchange, I would like you to assure me an opportunity to consider the purchase of this world, in the event that you don't find the 'sponsor'."

Gersen could not restrain a mild gibe. "You gave me to understand that you weren't particularly interested."

"Your assumptions are of no consequence," said Kelle evenly. "This should not injure your sensibilities, for you clearly are not concerned as to my opinion of you. You approach me as if I were mentally deficient, with a tale which would not impress a child."

Gersen shrugged. "The tale is substantially accurate. Naturally I haven't told you everything."

Kelle smiled again, rather more generously. "Well, let's see what the records have to tell." He spoke into the microphone.

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The non-human voice of the information bank responded. "Confidential Information, ready."

"The file on Lugo Teehalt." He spelled out the name.

There was a series of subdued mutterings, a quiet eery whistling. The voice spoke once more, reading off the information it had gathered. "Lugo Teehalt: his file. Contents: application for admission, verification and appended comment. April 3, 1480."

"Pass," said Kelle.

"Application for admission to advanced regimen, verification and appended comment. July 2, 1485."

"Pass."

"Thesis for degree in College of Symbology: title: 'The Meaningful Elements in the Eye-Motion of the Tunkers of Mizar Six'. December 20, 1489."

"Pass."

"Application for post as associate instructor, verification and comment. March 15, 1490."

"Pass."

"Discharge of Lugo Teehalt, associate instructor, for conduct which appeared predjudicial to morale of student corpus. October 19, 1492."

"Pass."

"Contract between Lugo Teehalt and Department of Galactic Morphology, January 6, 1521."

Gersen exhaled a small sigh, at the reduction of tension of whose existence he had barely been aware. It was definite: Lugo Teehalt had been employed as locater by someone within the department.

"Quote in resume," Kelle ordered.

"Lugo Teehalt and Department of Galactic Morphology agree and covenant to the following. Department will furnish Teehalt a suitable space-vessel, provisioned, equipped, found in typical and useful manner, in order that Teehalt shall conduct, as agent of Department, assiduous exploration of certain areas of galaxy. Department advances Teehalt sum of five thousand SVU and guarantees a bonus of graduated values for degrees of successful exploration. Teehalt agrees to devote best efforts to successful pursuit of exploration, to preserve results of said exploration secure and secret from all persons, groups, and agencies other than those authorized by Department. Signatures: Lugo Teehalt for Lugo Teehalt; Ominah Bazerman for Department.

"No further information."

"Mmf," said Kagge Kelle. He spoke to the screen. "Ominah Bazerman."

A click, a voice spoke. "Ominah Bazerman, Chief Clerk."

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"Kelle speaking. Two years ago a certain Lugo Teehalt was despatched as a locater. You signed his contract. Do you remember the circumstances?"

There was a moment's silence. "No, Mr. Kelle, I can't say that I do. The contract probably came to me in a set of other papers."

"You don't remember who would have initiated this contract, who sponsored this particular exploration?"

"No, sir. It must have been either yourself or Mr. Detteras. Or perhaps Mr. Warweave. No one else would order out such an exploration."

"I see. Thank you." Kelle turned to Gersen, his eyes mild, almost bovine. "And there you have it. If it wasn't Warweave, it must be Detteras. As a matter of fact Detteras is former Dean of the College of Symbology. Perhaps he and Teehalt were acquaintances..."

Rundle Detteras, Director of Exploration, seemed a man completely at his ease—at peace with himself, his job, the world at large. When Gersen entered his office he held up his hand in easy salute.

Detteras was a large man, surprisingly ugly for this age when a pointed nose or an over-loose mouth could be repaired in a matter of hours. He made no attempt to camouflage his ugliness. Indeed, it seemed as if his rather harsh blue-green skin-dye, almost the color of verdigris, accentuated the coarseness of his features, the rather gauche brusqueness of his motions. His head was the shape of a gourd. The heavy chin rested on his breast with no perceptible intervention of neck; the hair was a bristle dyed the color of wet moss. From knee to shoulder he seemed of uniform thickness, with a torso like a log. He wore the quasi-military uniform of a Baron of the Order of Archangels: black boots, loose scarlet breeches, a splendid blouse striped green, blue and scarlet, with gold epaulettes and filigreed breast plates.

Rundle Detteras was of sufficient presence to command both the uniform and his odd physiognomy. A man with the slightest dubiety or self-consciousness would instantly have seemed eccentric.

"Well, well, Mr. Gersen," said Detteras, "is it too early for a taste of arrack?"

"I'm out of bed."

Detteras stared in brief puzzlement, then laughed heartily. "Excellent! This is when I usually hoist the hospitality flag. Tint, tang, or white?"

"White, please."

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Detteras poured from the tall slender flask. He raised his glass: "Detteras *au pouvoir!*" He drank with gusto. "First of the day, like a visit home to mother." He poured himself a second tot, settled back, turned upon Gersen a glance of leisurely appraisal.

Gersen asked himself, which one? Warweave? Kelle? Detteras? One of these exteriors hid the ferocious soul of Grendel the Monster. Warweave? Kelle? Detteras? Gersen had inclined toward Warweave; now he was once more dubious. Detteras had undeniable force, a rude harsh-textured energy that was almost palpable.

Detteras apparently felt no urgency about coming to grips with Gersen's business, for all the reputed press of his affairs. It was not unlikely that he and Warweave had been in communication, and possibly Kelle likewise. "A never-ending puzzle," said Detteras, rather pompously. "The modes of why and how men differ."

If Detteras were in no hurry thought Gersen, neither was he. "No doubt you're right," he said, "although I don't understand the immediate relevance."

Detteras laughed, a heavy booming sound. "Quite as it should be. I would be surprised if you professed otherwise." He held up his hand to forestall Gersen's response. "Presumption on my part? No. Hear me out. You are a somber and pragmatic man. You carry a heavy load of secrets and dark resolves."

Gersen sipped suspiciously at the arrack. The verbal pyrotechnics might be intended as a distraction, a device to diminish his wariness. He concentrated on the arrack, senses keen for the faintest off-flavor. Detteras had poured both drinks from the same flask, he had offered Gersen a choice of three distillations, he had taken up glasses without seeming calculation. There existed, nonetheless, enormous scope for ruse, which no normal vigilance could prevent... But the drink was innocent, so Gersen's tongue and nasal passages, trained on Sarkovy, assured him.

He focused his attention upon Detteras and the previous remark. "Your opinions regarding me are exaggerated."

Detteras grinned, a great gap-lipped grimace. "But nevertheless essentially accurate?"

"Possibly."

Detteras nodded complacently, as if Gersen had given him the most emphatic of corroborations. "It is a skill, or habit of observation, born of long years of study. I formerly specialized in Symbology, until I decided that I'd cropped the pasture as

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short as my teeth were long, and as far as my tether would reach. So here I am in Galactic Morphology. A less complicated field, descriptive rather than analytic, objective rather than humanistic. Still, I occasionally find application for my previous field. Now is a case in point. You come into my office, an utter stranger. I assess your overt symbolic presentation: skin color; shape, condition, color of your hair; features, clothes, your general style. You will say this is common practice. I reply, true. Everyone eats, but a skilled taster is rare. I read these symbols with minute exactitude, and they provide me with information about your personality. I, on the other hand, deny similar knowledge to you. How? I bedizen myself with random and contradictory symbols, I am in constant camouflage, behind which the real Rundle Detteras watches, as calm and cool as an impresario at the hundredth performance of a glittering carnival extravaganza."

Gersen smiled. "My nature might be as flamboyant as your symbols, and I might dissemble it for reasons similar to your own — whatever they are. A second point: your presentation, if it can be believed, illuminated you almost as clearly as the set of your natural symbols. Third —why bother in the first place?"

Detteras seemed much amused. "Aha! You show me for the fraud and charlatan I am! Still, I cannot avoid the conviction that your symbols tell me more about you than mine do about me."

Gersen leaned back in his seat. "To little practical effect."

"Not so fast," exclaimed Detteras. "You occupy yourself exclusively with positivity! Consider negativity for a moment. Some people fret regarding the cryptic mannerisms of their colleagues. You protest that the symbols tell you nothing of importance; you dismiss them. These others worry because they cannot integrate a proliferation of information." Gersen started to demur; Detteras held up his hand. "Consider the Tunkers of Mizar Six. You are acquainted with them? A religious sect."

"I heard them mentioned a few minutes ago."

"As I say," Detteras continued, "they are a religious group. Ascetic, austere, devout to an astonishing extreme. The men and women dress identically, shave their heads, use a language of eight hundred and twelve words, eat identical meals at identical hours — all this to protect themselves from the perplexity of wondering about each other's motivations. True. This is the

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basic purpose of the Tunker mode. And not too far from Mizar is Sirene, where for a similar reason men wear highly conventionalized masks, from birth to death. Their face is their dearest secret." He proffered the arrack flask. Gersen held out his glass.

Detteras continued. "The practice here on Alphanor is more complicated. We gird ourselves for offense and defense, or sheer playfulness, with a thousand ambiguous symbols. The business of living is enormously complicated. Artificial tensions are established. Uncertainty and suspicion become normality."

"And in the process," suggested Gersen, "sensitivities are developed unknown to either the Tunkers or the Sirenese."

Detteras held up his hand. "Again, not so fast. I know a great deal about both these peoples. Insensitivity is a word which cannot be applied to either. The Sirenese will detect the most remote nuance of uneasiness when a man masks himself above his status. And the Tunkers — I know less of them, but I believe that their personal differentiations are as refined and varied as our own, if not more so. I quote an analogous esthetic doctrine: the tighter the discipline of an art-form, the more subjective the criteria of taste. Consider the Star Kings — nonmen driven by their psyches to literally superhuman excellences. They must enter the field cold, as it were, without even the human racial unconscious as a matrix for their symbolic education. Returning to Alphanor, it must be remembered that the folk thrust an enormous amount of perfectly valid information at each other, as well as ambiguities."

"Confusing," said Gersen dryly, "if one allows himself to be distracted."

Detteras laughed quietly, evidently well pleased with himself. "You've led a different life than I have, Mr. Gersen. On Alphanor the issues aren't life and death; everyone is fairly sophisticated. It's easier than not to accept people at their own valuation. Indeed it's often impractical not to do so." He looked sidelong at Gersen. "Why do you smile?"

"It dawns upon me that the dossier on Kirth Gersen, requested from the IPCC, is slow in arriving. In the meantime, you find it impractical to accept me at my own valuation. Or even your own."

Detteras laughed in his turn. "You do both me and the IPCC an injustice. The dossier came promptly, several minutes before your arrival." He pointed to a

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photostat sheet on his desk. "I ordered the dossier, incidentally, in my role as a responsible officer of the institution. I think my caution was proper."

"What did you learn?" asked Gersen. "I haven't seen the dossier recently."

"It's marvellously blank." He picked up the paper. "You were born in 1490. Where? Not on one of the major worlds. At the age of 10, you registered into Galileo Space Port on Earth, in the company of your grandfather, whose antecedents perhaps we should likewise check. You attended the usual schools, were accepted by the Institute as catechumen, reached the eleventh phase at the age of twenty-four. Quite respectable progress. Then you withdrew. From now on there is no record, suggesting that either you remained permanently on Earth, or departed illegally, without registration. Since you now sit before me, the latter seems to have been the case. Remarkable," said Detteras, "that a person could live to your age in a society as complex as the Oikumene with so little official record! Long years of silence while you were occupied where? How? To what purpose and to what effect?" He glanced questioningly at Gersen.

"If it's not there," said Gersen, "I don't want it there."

"Naturally . . . There is very little more." He tossed down the dossier. "Now you are anxious to make your inquiries. I will anticipate you. I knew Lugo Teehalt, far back indeed, in my undergraduate days. He involved himself in some sort of unsavory mess, and dropped from sight. A year or so ago he came to me, asking for a locater's contract."

Gersen stared at him fascinated. So here was Grendel! "And you sent him out?"

"I chose not to do so. I did not want him dependent upon me for the rest of his life. I was willing to help him, but not on a personal basis. I told him to apply either to the Honorary Provost Gyle Warweave, or the Chairman of the Research Planning Committee Kagge Kelle; to mention my name, that very likely they could assist him. This was the last I heard of him."

Gersen took a deep breath. Detteras spoke with the assurance of truth. But which of them had not? Detteras at least had confirmed that one of the three — either himself, Warweave or Kelle — was lying.

Which?

Today he had seen Grendel, looked into his eyes, listened to his voice.

He was suddenly uneasy. Why was Detteras so relaxed? Pre-

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sumably a busy man, how could he spare so much time? Gersen sat abruptly up in his chair. "I will get to the point of my call upon you." He told the story he had already related to Warweave and Kelle while Detteras listened with a faint smile playing over his coarse mouth. Gersen displayed the photographs and Detteras looked at them negligently.

"A beautiful world," said Detteras. "If I were wealthy I would ask you to sell it to me for my personal estate. However, I am not wealthy. To the contrary. In any event, you seem not so much anxious to sell your rights to this world as to locate poor old Teehalt's sponsor."

Gersen was somewhat taken aback. "I'll sell to the sponsor for a reasonable price."

Detteras smiled skeptically. "Sorry. I can't admit to a falsehood. Warweave or Kelle is your man."

"They deny it."

"Strange. So then?"

"The filament is useless to me in its present condition. Will you furnish me the decoding strip?"

"I'm afraid that's out of the question."

"I thought as much. So I must sell to one or the other of you, or to the university. Or destroy the filament."

"Hm." Detteras judiciously nodded his head. "This demands careful thought. If your demands were not excessive, I'd be interested. . . Or perhaps the three of us, in concert, could come to some agreement with you. Hm. Let me speak to Warweave and Kelle. And then, if you could, come back tomorrow, say at ten. I might have a definite proposition to put before you."

Gersen rose to his feet. "Very well. Tomorrow at ten."

VIII

Yes, we are a reactionary, secretive, pessimistic, organization. We have agents everywhere. We know a thousand tricks to discourage research, sabotage experiments, distort data. Even in the Institute's own laboratories we proceed with deliberation and discretion.

But now let me answer some of the questions and accusations we often hear. Do the members of the Institute enjoy wealth, privilege, power, freedom from the law? Honesty compels the answer: yes, in varying degree, depending upon phase, achievement.

Then the Institute is an inbred, restricted, centripetal group? By no means. We consider ourselves an intellectual elite, certainly. Why should we

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not? Membership is open to anyone, although few of our catechumens achieve even so far as the fifth phase.

Our policy? Simple enough. Space-drive has given a terrible weapon to any megalomaniacs who happen to occur in our midst. There is other knowledge which, if equally free, could ensure them tyrannical power. We therefore control the dissemination of knowledge.

We are scathed as "self-anointed divinities"; we are accused of pedantry, conspiracy, condescension; smugness, arrogance, obstinate self-righteousness. These are the mildest of the objurgations we hear. We are accused of intolerable paternalism, and in the same breath reproached for disengagement from ordinary human affairs. Why do we not use our lore to lighten toil, alleviate pain, prolong life? Why do we stand aloof? Why do we not transform the human estate into a Utopia, a task well within our power?

The answer is simple — perhaps deceptively so. We feel these are false boons; that peace and satiety are akin to death. For all its rawness and cruel excess we envy archaic humanity its ardent experience. We hold that gain after toil, triumph after adversity, achievement to a goal long-sought, is a greater beneficence than prebendary nutrient from the teat of an indulgent government.

— From the television address by Madian Carbuke, Centennial (Hundredth Phase Fellow) of the Institute, December 2, 1502.

Conversation between two Centennials of the Institute, in connection with a third not present:

"I would gladly come to your house for a chat, if I did not suspect that Ramus were likewise invited."

"But what is so wrong with Ramus? He often amuses me."

"He is a fungus, a flatulence, a pompous old toad, and he irritates the hell out of me."

Question occasionally put to Fellows of the Institute: Are Star Kings included among the fellowship?
The customary answer: We certainly hope not.

Motto of the Institute: *A little knowledge is a dangerous thing; a great deal of knowledge is disaster,* which detractors of the Institute scornfully paraphrase to: *Somebody else's ignorance is bliss.*

Pallis Atwrode lived with two other girls in a seaside apart-

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ment tower to the south of Remo. Gersen waited in the lobby while she ran up to change clothes and re-tint her skin.

He went out on the deck overlooking the ocean, leaned against the rail. Great blazing Rigel hung low over the ocean, laying a molten road from shore to horizon. Near at hand in the harbor, enclosed by twin piers, a hundred boats were moored: power yachts, sailing catamarans, glass-hulled submarines, a shoal of jet-powered aquaplanes, to be ridden at maniacal speed over, through and across the waves.

Gersen's mood was complex. It puzzled even himself. There was the heart-bumping anticipation of an evening with a pretty girl, a sensation he had not known for years. There was the melancholy normally induced by sunset — and now the sunset was beautiful indeed; the sky glowed mauve and green-blue, around a great bank of persimmon-orange clouds stranded with magenta. It was not the beauty which brought on melancholy, mused Gersen, but rather the quiet halcyon light and its fading.

And there was another melancholy — different yet somehow similar — which came to Gersen as he watched the debonair folk about him. They were all graceful and easy, untouched by the toil and pain and terror that existed on remote worlds. Gersen envied them their detachment, their social skills.

Still, would he change places with any of them? He would not.

Pallis Atwrode came to join him by the rail. She had tinted herself a beautiful soft olive-green, with a subtle patina of gold; she now wore her hair in a loose dark curly cap. She laughed at Gersen's obvious approval. "I feel like a wharf-rat," said Gersen. "I should have changed into new clothes."

"Please don't worry," she said. "It's completely unimportant. Now. What shall we do?"

"You'll have to make suggestions."

"Very well. Let's go into Avente and sit on the esplanade. I never tire of watching people walk past. Then we can decide what's next."

Gersen acceded; they walked to the slide-car and drove north, Pallis chattering with ingenuous candor about herself, her job, her opinions, plans and hopes.

She was, so Gersen learned, a native of Singhal Island, on the planet Ys. Her parents were prosperous, owning the only cold-storage warehouse of the Lantango Peninsula. When they retired to the Palmetto Islands,

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her oldest brother took control of the warehouse and likewise the family home. The brother next older had wished to marry her, this form of union being countenanced on Ys, which had been settled originally by a group of Reformed Rationalists. But the brother was stout, red-faced, arrogant, without a trade other than driving the warehouse van, and the prospect held no charm for Pallis.

At this point Pallis hesistated and her candor seemed to slip gears, for she changed the subject. Gersen guessed at the dramatic confrontations, fierce reproaches and countering accusations which had taken place. Pallis had now lived in Avente for two years, and though sometimes homesick for the sights and sounds of Ys, she felt herself happy and lucky. Gersen was charmed by her talk. He had never known anyone so artless.

They parked the slider, walked out along the esplanade, selected a table in front of one of the numerous cafes and sat watching the crowds stroll by. Beyond spread the dark ocean, with the sky now plum and indigo-gray, with only the faintest tinge of lemon to mark the passage of Rigel.

The night was warm, folk from all the worlds of the Oikumene sauntered past. The waiter brought goblets of punch. Gersen sipped, his tensions began to relax. Neither spoke for a period; then Pallis suddenly turned to face him.

"You're so silent. So guarded. It is because you're in from Beyond?"

Gersen had no ready reply. Finally he gave a rueful laugh. "I hoped you'd think me easy and suave, like everyone else. . ."

"Oh, come now," said Pallis teasingly. "Nobody's like everyone else."

"I'm not altogether sure," said Gersen. "I suppose it's a matter of relativity: how near you are. Even bacteria have individuality, if they're examined closely enough."

"So now I'm a bacterium," said Pallis.

"Well, I'm another, and I'm probably boring you."

"No, no! Of course not! I'm enjoying myself."

"So am I. Too much. It's — enervating."

Pallis scented a compliment. "How do you mean?"

"I can't allow myself the luxury of emotional commitments — even if I should like to."

"You're much, much, much too sober for a young man."

"I'm not young any more."

She made a gay gesture. "But you admit you're sober!"

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"I suppose so. But be careful, don't push me too far."

"A woman likes to think herself a temptress."

Again Gersen had no response. He studied Pallis across the table. For the moment she seemed content to watch the passers-by. What a warm-hearted gay creature, he thought, without a trace of malice or acerbity.

Pallis turned her attention back to him. "You're really such a quiet man," she told him. "Everyone else I know refuses to stop talking, and I listen to continual floods of nonsense. I'm sure you know hundreds of interesting things, and you refuse to tell me any of them."

Gersen grinned. "They're probably less interesting than you think."

"Still, I'd like to make sure. So tell me about the Beyond. Is life really so dangerous?"

"Sometimes yes, sometimes no. It depended on whom you meet, and why."

"But — perhaps you'd rather I didn't ask — what do you do? You're not a pirate or a slaver?"

"Do I look like a pirate? Or a slaver?"

"You know that I don't know what a pirate or a slaver looks like! But I'm curious. Are you a — well, criminal? Not that it's necessarily a disgrace," she added hastily. "Affairs which are perfectly acceptable on one planet are absolutely taboo on another. For instance, I told one of my friends that all my life I'd expected to marry my oldest brother — and her hair uncurled!"

"I'm sorry to disappoint you," said Gersen, "but I'm not a criminal. I don't fit into any category." He considered. There could be no indiscretion in telling her what he had told Warweave, Kelle and Detteras. "I've come to Avente for a particular purpose, naturally—"

"Let's have dinner," said Pallis, "and you can tell me while we eat."

"Where shall we go?"

"There's an exciting new restaurant, only just opened. Everyone's talking about it and I've never been there." She jumped to her feet, took his hand with an easy intimacy, pulled him upright. He caught her under the arms, bent forward, but his daring waned; he laughed and released her. She said archly, "You're more impulsive than you look."

Gersen grinned, half shamefacedly. "Well, where is the exciting new restaurant?"

"Not far. We can walk. It's rather expensive, but I plan to pay half the account."

"That's not necessary," said

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Gersen. "Money is no particular problem to a pirate. If I run short, I'll rob someone. You perhaps. . ."

"It's hardly worth the trouble. . . . Come along then." She took his hand, and they walked north along the esplanade like any of the thousand other couples abroad this fine Alphanor evening.

She led him to a kiosk circled by large luminous green letters reading: NAUTILUS. An escalator dropped them two hundred feet into a tall octagonal lobby paneled with rattan screens. A major domo escorted them along a glass-vaulted tunnel, out upon the floor of the sea. Dining rooms of various sizes opened off the passage, into one of which they were conducted. They took a table close beside the sloping glass dome. The sea lay beyond, with beacons illuminating the sand, rocks, seaweed, coral, the passing submarine creatures.

"Now," said Pallis, leaning forward, "tell me about the Beyond. And don't worry about alarming me, because I love an occasional shudder."

"Smade's Tavern on Smade's Planet is a good place to start," said Gersen. "You've been there?"

"Of course not. But I've heard it mentioned."

"It's a small, barely habitable planet out in the middle of nowhere. All mountains. Wind, thunderstorms, an ocean black as ink. The tavern is the only building on the planet. Sometimes it's crowded, sometimes there'll be no one but Smade and his family for weeks on end. When I arrived the only other guest was a Star King."

"A Star King? I thought they were always disguised as men."

"It's not a matter of disguise," said Gersen. "They *are* men. Almost."

"I never have understood about the Star Kings. Just what are they?"

Gersen shrugged. "You'll get a different answer every time you ask. The general speculation goes like this. A million years ago, more or less, the planet Lambda Grus III, or 'Ghnarumen' — you have to cough through your nose to get it even approximately right — was inhabited by a rather frightening assortment of creatures. Among them was a small amphibious biped without any particular tools for survival except awareness and an ability to hide in the mud. He probably looked a little like a lizard, or a hairless seal . . . The species faced extinction half a dozen times, but a few always managed to hang on, and somehow scavenge an existence among crea-

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tures who were more savage, more cunning, more agile, better swimmers, better climbers, even better scavengers than themselves. The proto-Star Kings had only psychical advantages. Self-consciousness. Competitiveness. A desire to stay alive by any means whatever."

"They sound rather like the proto-humans on ancient Earth," said Pallis.

"No one knows for sure. At least no men. What the Star Kings know they're not telling... These bipeds differed from proto-man in several respects. They were biologically much more flexible, able to transmit acquired characteristics. Secondly, they are not bisexual. There is cross-fertilization by means of spores emitted on the breath, but each individual is male and female at once, and the young develop as pods in the armpits. Perhaps from this lack of sexual differentiation the Star Kings have no natural physical vanity. Their basic drive is the urge to out-do, to out-function, to out-survive. The biological flexibility coupled to a rudimentary intelligence provided the means to implement their ambitions; they consciously began to breed themselves into a creature which could out-perform as many of their less resourceful competitors as possible.

This is all speculation, of course, and what follows is speculation on an even more tenuous basis. But just let's assume that some race able to traverse space visited Earth. It might have been the people which left ruins on the Fomalhaut planets, or the Hexadelts, or whoever carved Monument Cliff on Xi Puppis X.

"We assume that such a space-traveling people came by Earth a hundred thousand years ago. Assume that they captured a tribe of Mousterian Neanderthals, and for some reason conveyed them to Ghnarumen, the world of the proto-Star Kings. Here is a challenging situation for both parties. The men are far more dangerous opponents to the Star Kings than the now-defeated natural enemies. The men are intelligent, patient, crafty, ruthless, aggressive. Under pressure of the environment the men themselves evolve into a different type: more agile, faster of body and mind than their Neanderthal predecessors.

"The proto-Star Kings suffer setbacks, but they have their hereditary patience as well as important weapons: the competitive urge, the biological flexibility. Men have proved superior to themselves. To compete with men they shape themselves into human semblance.

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"Their war continues . . . and the Star Kings admit, very guardedly, that certain of their myths describe these wars.

"Another assumption now becomes necessary. About fifty thousand years ago the space travelers return and convey the evolved Earthmen back to Earth. And perhaps a few Star Kings — who knows? And so the Cro-Magnons appear in Europe.

"On their own planet the Star Kings are at last more man-like than men. They prevail. The true men are destroyed. The Star Kings are supreme and remain so until five hundred years ago, when the men of Earth discover the intersplit. When they chance upon 'Ghnarumen' they are astonished to find creatures exactly resembling themselves: the Star Kings."

"It sounds far-fetched," said Pallis dubiously.

"Not as far-fetched as convergent evolution. It is a fact that Star Kings exist: a race not antagonistic, but not friendly either. Men are not allowed to visit Ghnarumen. They tell us only as much about themselves as they care to, and they send observers — spies, if you like — everywhere throughout the Oikumene. There are probably a dozen Star Kings in Avente."

Pallis grimaced. "How can you tell them from men?"

"Sometimes even a doctor can't, after they finish disguising and faking themselves. There are differences, of course. They have no genital organs; their pubic region is blank. Their protoplasm, blood, hormones have a different composition. Their breath has a distinctive odor. But the spies, or whatever they are, are altered, so that even an x-ray shows the same as that of a man."

"How did you know the — the creature at Smade's Tavern was a Star King?"

"Smade told me."

"How did Smade know?"

Gersen shook his head. "I never thought to ask."

He sat silent, preoccupied with a new notion.

There had been three guests at Smade's Tavern: himself, Teehalt, and the Star King. If Tristano were to be believed — and why not? — he had arrived in company only with Dasce and Suthiro. If Dasce's statement to Teehalt were to be credited, Grendel must be reckoned Teehalt's murderer. Gersen had certainly heard Teehalt's scream, while Suthiro, Dasce and Tristano stood within his range of vision.

Unless Smade were Grendel, unless another ship had surreptitiously arrived — unlikely

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events — then Grendel and the Star King must be one. Thinking back, Gersen recalled that the Star King had left the dining hall in ample time to allow a conference outside with Dasce.

Pallis Atwrode lightly touched his cheek. "You were telling me of Smade's Tavern."

"Yes," said Gersen. "So I was." He looked at her speculatively. She must certainly know a great deal about the comings and goings of Warweave, Kelle and Detteras. Pallis, misunderstanding the nature of his gaze, flushed prettily under her pale-green skin-toning. Gersen laughed uneasily. "Back to Smade's Tavern." He described the events of the evening.

Pallis listened with interest, almost forgetting to eat. "So now you have Lugo Teehalt's filament and the university has the decoder."

"Correct, and neither one valuable without the other."

They finished dinner. Gersen, with no credit account on Alphanor, paid the bill in cash, and they returned to the surface. "Now what would you like?"

"I don't care," said Pallis. "Let's go back along the esplanade to our table, for a while anyway."

The night was now dark: the moonless black-velvet night of Alphanor. The facade of every building at the back of the esplanade glowed faintly, blue or green or pink; the pavement gave off a silver effulgence; the balustrade emitted a pleasant, almost unseen amber-beige radiance; everywhere was soft shadowless light, rich with muted ghost-color. Up in the dark sky stars floated, big, vague, pale.

A waiter brought coffee and liqueur and they settled back to watch the passing crowds.

Pallis said in a reflective voice, "You're not telling me everything."

"Of course not," said Gersen. "In fact. . ." Gersen paused, grappling with a disturbing new thought. Grendel might mistake the nature of his interest in Pallis — especially if Grendel were a Star King, sexless, unable to understand the male-female relationship. "In fact," said Gersen in a bleak voice, "I really have no right involving you in my troubles."

"I don't feel involved," said Pallis, stretching her arms lazily. "And if I were, what of it? This is Avente on Alphanor, a civilized planet."

Gersen gave a sardonic chuckle. "I told you that others were interested in this planet. Well — these others are pirates and slavers as depraved as you could want. Have you ever heard of Grendel?"

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"Grendel the Monster? Yes."

Gersen resisted the temptation of telling her that she took messages and ran errands daily for Grendel. "It's almost certain," he said, "that stick-tights are watching us. Now. This very minute. And the other end of the circuit is possibly Grendel himself."

Pallis moved uneasily, scanned the sky. "Don't you mean that Grendel is watching me? That's a creepy feeling."

Gersen looked to right, to left, stared. Two tables away sat Suthiro, the Sarkoy venefice.

Meeting Gersen's eye, Suthiro nodded politely, smiled. He rose to his feet, sauntered to the table.

"Good evening, Mr. Gersen."

"Good evening," said Gersen.

"May I join you?"

"I'd prefer not."

Suthiro laughed softly, seated himself and inclined his fox face toward Pallis. "And this young lady, do you plan to introduce me?"

"You already know who she is."

"But she does not know me."

Gersen turned to Pallis. "Here you see Scop Suthiro, Master Venefice of Sarkovy. You expressed an interest in evil men? Here you have as completely evil a man as you're likely to meet."

Suthiro laughed in easy glee. "Mr. Gersen judiciously uses the word 'likely'. Certain of my friends surpass me as grandly as I surpass you. I hope indeed that you do not meet them. Hildemar Dasce, for instance, who boasts of his ability to paralyze dogs with a glance."

Pallis' voice was troubled. "I'd just as soon not meet him." She stared at Suthiro in fascination. "You really — admit that you're evil?"

Suthiro laughed once more, a subtle muffled sound. "I am a man. I am a Sarkoy."

Gersen said, "I've just been describing our encounter at Smade's Tavern to Miss Atwrode. Tell me something. Who killed Lugo Teehalt?"

Suthiro seemed surprised. "Who else but Grendel? We three sat within. Does it make any difference? It might as easily have been myself or Beauty or Tristano... Tristano, by the way, is quite ill. He suffered a dreadful accident, but hopes to see you on his recovery."

"He can consider himself lucky," said Gersen.

"He is ashamed," said Suthiro. "He thinks himself skillful. I have told him he is not so skillful as I."

"Speaking of skill," said Gersen, "can you do the paper trick?"

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Suthiro cocked his head sidewise. "Yes, of course. Where did you learn of the paper trick?"

"At Kalvaing."

"And what wrought you at Kalvaing?"

"A visit with Coudirou the venefice."

Suthiro pursed his heavy red lips. He wore a yellow skin-tone; his brown pelt was glossy and smooth with oil. "Coudirou is as wise as any. As for the paper trick. . ." Gersen handed him a napkin. Suthiro suspended it from left thumb and forefinger, stroked it lightly with his right hand. It fell to the table in five ribbons.

"Well done," said Gersen, and to Pallis: "His fingernails are hardened, sharp as razors. Naturally he would waste no poison on the paper, but each of his fingers is like the head of a serpent."

Suthiro made complacent acquiescence.

Gersen turned back to him. "Where is Fancy Dasce?"

"Not too far distant."

"Red face and all?"

Suthiro shook his head sadly, at Dasce's poor taste in skin-toning. "A very able and very strange man. Have you ever wondered about his face?"

"When I could bear to look at it."

"You are not my friend. You tricked me beautifully. Nevertheless I will warn you: never cross Fancy Dasce. Twenty years ago he was thwarted in some small escapade. It was a matter of collecting money from an obstinate man. Hildemar by chance found himself at a disadvantage. He was knocked down and strapped hand and foot. So now his creditor had the poor taste to cleave poor Hildemar's nose, and cut off his eyelids. . . Hildemar eventually escaped and now is known as Beauty Dasce, or Fancy Dasce."

"How awful," muttered Pallis.

"Exactly." Suthiro's voice became contemptuous. "A year later Hildemar allowed himself the luxury of capturing this man. He conveyed him to a private place, where he lives to this day. And occasionally Hildemar, remembering the outrage which cost him his features, returns to this private place to remonstrate with the man."

Pallis turned glazed eyes at Gersen. "These people are your friends?"

"No. We are associated only through Lugo Teehalt." Suthiro was looking along the esplanade. Gersen asked idly, "You and Dasce and Tristano work together and train together as a team?"

"Often, though I for one prefer a singular scope."

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"And Lugo Teehalt had the misfortune to blunder upon you at Brinktown?"

"He died quickly. Godogma takes all men. Is this misfortune?"

"One never likes to hasten Godogma."

"True." Suthiro inspected his strong agile hands. "Agreed." He looked toward Pallis. "On Sarkovy we have a thousand popular aphorisms to this effect."

"Who is Godogma?"

"The Great God of Destiny, who carries a flower and a flail, and walks on wheels."

Gersen put on an air of studious concentration. "I will ask you a question. You need not answer. In fact, perhaps you do not know; but I am puzzled. Why should Grendel, a Star King, so vehemently desire this particular world?"

Suthiro shrugged. "This is a matter with which I have never concerned myself. Apparently the world is valuable. I am paid. I kill only when I must or when it profits me — so you see," he told Pallis parenthetically, "I am not really so evil a man, am I now? Presently I will return to Sarkovy and live out my days roaming the Gorobundur Steppe. Ah, now! There is the life! When I think of those times to come, I wonder why I sit here now, beside this odious wetness." He grimaced toward the sea and rose to his feet. "It is a presumption to advise you, but why not be sensible? You can never defeat Grendel. Therefore relinquish the filament."

Gersen thought a moment, then said, "I will also presume, in the same spirit which prompts you. My advice is this: kill Hildemar Dasce the next moment you see him, or even before."

Suthiro knit his furry brown eyebrows in puzzlement, glanced for the most fleeting instant upward.

Gersen continued. "There is a stick-tight watching us, although I have not located it. Its microphone probably registers our conversation. Until you told me, I had no idea that the Star King at Smade's Tavern was Grendel. I am interested. I do not think this is common knowledge."

"Quiet!" hissed Suthiro, eyes blazing with sudden red wrath.

Gersen lowered his voice. "Hildemar Dasce quite possibly will be asked to punish you. If you wish to forestall Godogma, if you wish to take your wagon across Gorobundur Steppe — kill Dasce and go."

Suthiro hissed something below his breath, jerked up his hand as if to throw, then backed away, turned, melted into the crowd.

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Pallis relaxed, slumped into her chair. In an uncertain voice she said, "I'm not as adventurous as I supposed myself."

"I'm sorry," said Gersen genuinely contrite. "I should never have asked you out."

"No, no. I just can't accustom myself to that kind of talk, here on the esplanade, in peaceful Avente. But I suppose I'm actually enjoying it. If you're not a criminal, who or what are you?"

"Kirth Gersen."

"You must work for the IPCC."

"No."

"Then you must be on the Institute's Special Committee."

"I'm just Kirth Gersen." He rose to his feet. "Let's walk for a bit."

They went north along the esplanade. To the left lay dark sea; to the right the edifices glowing in various soft colors; and beyond, the skyline of Avente: luminous spires against the black Alphanor night.

Pallis presently took Gersen's arm. "Tell me, what if Grendel is a Star King? What does that mean?"

"I've been wondering myself." Indeed, Gersen had been trying to remember the look of the Star King. Had it been Warweave? Kelle? Or Detteras? The lusterless black skin-tone had blurred the features; the striped coif had covered the hair. Gersen had an impression that the Star King had been taller than Kelle, but not quite so tall as Warweave. But would even the black skin-tone have camouflaged Detteras's rude rough features?

Pallis was speaking: "Will they really kill that man?"

Gersen glanced up to see if he could locate the stick-tight, without success. "I don't know. He's useful. Incidentally—" Gersen hesitated, wondering anew as to the ethics of involving Pallis in the sordid affair.

"Incidentally what?"

"Nothing." For fear of the stick-tight's microphone Gersen dare not inquire as to the movements of Kelle, Detteras and Warweave; Grendel so far had no reason to suspect his interest.

Pallis said in an injured voice, "I still don't understand how all of this affects you."

Once more Gersen chose to be discreet. The stick-tight might hear; Pallis Atwrode herself might be an agent of Grendel's though Gersen considered this unlikely. So he said, "Not at all—except in the abstract."

"But any of these people—" she nodded to the passersby—"they might be Star Kings. How could we separate them from men?"

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"It's hard. On their home planet — I won't attempt to pronounce it again — they come in many approximations to man. Those who travel the known worlds as observers — spies, if you prefer, although I can't imagine what they hope to learn —they're almost exact facsimiles of true men."

Pallis suddenly seemed subdued. She opened her mouth to speak, then closed it again, and finally gave a gay fling of her hands. "Let's forget about them. Nightmares. You have me seeing Star Kings everywhere. Even at the university. . ."

Gersen looked down into her upturned face. "Do you know what I'd like to do?"

She smiled provocatively. "No. What?"

"First I'd like to shake off the stick-tight, which is no great problem. And then. . ."

"And then?"

"I'd like to go somewhere quiet, where we could be alone."

She looked away. "I don't mind. There's a place down the coast. Les Sirenes, it's called. I've never been there." She laughed in embarrassment. "But I've heard people talking."

Gersen took her arm. "First to shake off the stick-tight. . ."

Pallis entered into the maneuvers with child-like abandon. Looking into the merry face, Gersen wondered about his resolve to avoid emotional involvements. If they went to Les Sirenes, if the night brought them to closer intimacy, what then? Gersen thrust aside his qualms. He would cope with problems as they arose.

The stick-tight, if it had existed, was confounded and lost; they returned to the parking area. There was little light; the ranked round shapes glimmered with silky dull highlights.

They came to the slide-car; Gersen hesitated, then put his arms around the swaying girl, kissed her upturned face.

Behind him was the loom of movement; ahead a furtive shifting. Gersen turned, in time to look into a horrid blood-red face with poisonous blue cheeks. Hildemar Dasce's arm descended.

A great weight curled over Gersen's head; lightning exploded inside his skull. He tottered and fell to his knees. Dasce leaned over him. Gersen tried to dodge. The world reeled and toppled; he saw Suthiro grinning like a sick hyena, with his hand to the girl's neck. Dasce struck again, and the world went dim.

Gersen had time for an instant of bitter self-reproach, before another thunderous buffet extinguished his consciousness.

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IX

Excerpt from *When is a Man Not a Man,* by Podd Hachinsky, article in *Cosmopolis,* June, 1500:

. . . As men have traveled from star to star they have encountered many forms of life, intelligent and non-intelligent (to emphasize a perfectly arbitrary and possibly anthropomorphic parameter). No more than half a dozen of these life forms merit the adjective "humanoid". Of these half dozen, a single species closely resembles man: the Star Kings of Ghnarumen.

Ever since our initial astounded contact with the race, the question has recurred: are they of the family of man — the "bifurcate, bibrachiate, monocephaloid, polygamite", as Tallier Chantron waggishly puts it — or are they not? The answer, of course, depends on definitions.

One point can instantly be settled. The Star Kings are not *homo sapiens.* But if what is meant is a creature which can talk a human language, walk into a haberdashery and dress himself off a rack, play an excellent game of tennis, or fight a bout of chess, attend the regal functions of Stockholm or the lawn fetes of Strylvania without occasioning a lift of autocratic eyebrow — then they are men.

Man or not man, the typical Star King is a courteous, even-tempered fellow, even if suspicious and humorless. Do him a favor, he will thank you, but feel no obligation; injure him, he will explode in tigerish fury and kill you — if he is in a situation where human law cannot restrain him. If such action will cause legal trouble, he will instantly dismiss the injury and hold no grudge. He is ruthless but not cruel, and is puzzled by such perverse human manifestations as sadism, masochism, religious fervor, flagellation, suicide. On the other hand he will demonstrate a whole battery of peculiar habits and attitudes no less inexplicable from our point of view, arising from the twists and quirks of his own psyche.

To say that his origin is in dispute is like a remark to the effect that Croesus was well-off. At least a dozen theories to explain the remarkable similarity between Star King and Man exist. None are completely convincing. If the Star Kings themselves know, they will admit nothing. Since they bar all anthropological and archaeological research teams from their planet, we are afforded neither verification nor refutation of any of these theories.

On human planets they punctiliously model their conduct af-

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ter the best human examples, but their innate behaviour patterns are unique to the race. Perhaps to oversimplify, one can say that their dominant trait is a passion to excel, to outdo a competitor at his own game. Since man is the dominant creature of the Oikumene, the Star Kings accept him as the champion to be challenged and outdone. So they strive to outdo man in every aspect of the human capacity. If this ambition (at which they are often successful) seems unreal and artificial to us, no less so does our sexual drive seem to them; for the Star Kings are parthenogenetic, reproducing in a manner which is beyond the scope of this article to describe. Knowing nothing of vanity, setting no store by either beauty or ugliness, they strive for physical perfection only to score points in their semi-amicable contest with true men.

What of their achievements? They are fine builders, daring engineers, excellent technicians. They are a pragmatic race, and not particularly apt at mathematics or the speculative sciences. It is hard to conceive of their giving birth to a Jarnell, who discovered the space-splitter by sheer accident. Their cities are impressive sights, rising from the flatlands like a growth of metallic crystals. Each adult Star King builds for himself a spire or tower. The more fervent his ambition and more exalted his rank, the higher and more splendid his tower (which he seems to enjoy only as a monument). Upon his demise the tower may be temporarily occupied by some junior individual during the period in which he accumulates sufficient wealth to build his own tower. Inspirational as the cities seem from a distance, they lack the most obvious municipal utilities, and the areas between the towers are unpaved, dusty, littered. Factories, industrial plants and the like are housed in low utilitarian domes and manned by the least aggressive and least evolved of the species—for the race is by no means homogeneous. It is as if every human gathering included Proconsuls, Pithecanthropi, *sinanthropus giganticus,* Neanderthals, Magdalenians, Solutreans, Grimaldi, Cro-Magnon, and all the races of Modern Man.

At midnight a group of young folk came laughing and singing into the parking area. They had dined with unaccustomed amplitude at The Halls. They had visited Llanfelfair, Lost Star Inn, Haluce, the Casino Plageale. They were intoxicated, but as much by exuberance as

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by the wines, smokes, perfusions, subliminal whirligigs, chants, voltes and other exaltments purveyed by the houses which they had visited. The youth who stumbled over Gersen's body uttered first a jocular maledictiion, then an exclamation of shocked concern.

The group gathered. One ran to his vehicle and pressed the emergency call-button; two minutes later a police craft dropped down from the sky, and then an ambulance.

Gersen was conveyed to a hospital where he was treated for concussion and shock with appropriate irradiation, massage, and vitalizing medicines. He presently returned to consciousness, and for a moment lay thinking. Then he gave a sudden lurch and tried to rise from the bed. The attending interns cautioned him, but Gersen, paying no heed, struggled erect and stood swaying. "My clothes!" he croaked. "Give me my clothes!"

"They're safe in the closet, sir. Relax, recline, if you please. Here is the police officer to take your evidence."

Gersen lay back fretfully. The police investigator approached: a keen-faced young man wearing the yellow-brown jacket and black breeches of the Sea Province Constabulary. He addressed himself to Gersen politely, seated himself and opened the flap of the recorder lens.

"Now, sir, what happened?"

"I was out for the evening with a young woman, Miss Pallis Atwrode of Remo. When we came back to the car, I was slugged, and I don't know what happened to Miss Atwrode. The last thing I remember she was struggling to escape from one of the men."

"There were how many?"

"Two. I recognized them. Their names are Hildemar Dasce and a man I know only as Suthiro, a Sarkoy. Both are notorious men Beyond."

"I see. The young lady's name and address?"

"Pallis Atwrode, Merioneth Apartments, Remo."

"We'll check at once to make sure she hasn't arrived home. Now, Mr. Gersen, let's go over this again."

In a dull voice Gersen gave a detailed account of the attack, described Hildemar Dasce and Suthiro. As he spoke, a report came in from Constabulary Control. Pallis Atwrode had not returned to her apartment. Roads, airways and space-terminals were under observation. The IPCC had been called into the case. "Now, sir," said the investigator in a neutral voice, "may I inquire your business?"

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"I am a locater."

"What is the nature of your association with these two men?"

"None. I saw them at work once before, on Smade's Planet. Apparently they regard me as an enemy. I believe that they are part of Grendel the Monster's organization."

"Very strange that they should commit an actionable offense so brazenly. In fact, why did they not kill you?"

"I don't know." Gersen once more staggered to his feet. The investigator watched with professional attentiveness. "What are your plans, Mr. Gersen?"

"I want to find Pallis Atwrode."

"Understandable, sir. But it is best that you do not interfere. The police are more effective than a single man. We should have news for you at any time."

"I don't think so," said Gersen. "By now they're in space."

The investigator, rising to his feet, made tacit admission that such was the case. "We will naturally keep you informed." He bowed and departed.

Gersen immediately dressed, with the disapproving help of an orderly. His knees were weak. His hand floated in a kind of generalized all-embracing pain. There was a faint singing in his ears from the drugs.

An elevator dropped him directly to a subway station. Gersen stood on an exchange platform, straining to formulate a coherent plan of action. A phrase kept repeating itself compulsively, like an inch-worm traversing the inner surface of his skull: Poor Pallis, poor Pallis.

With no better plan in mind he stepped into a capsule and sent himself to a station under the Esplanade. He emerged, but instead of going to the car, took a seat in a brasserie and drank coffee. "By now she's in space," he told himself once more. "And it's my fault. My fault." Because he should have foreseen this sort of outcome. Pallis Atwrode knew Warweave, Kelle and Detteras well; she saw them daily, heard whatever gossip there was to be heard. Grendel the Star King, Grendel the Monster, was one of three men, and Pallis Atwrode evidently had knowledge which, coupled to Suthiro's indiscretions, made Grendel's incognito insecure. Hence she must be removed. Killed? Sold into slavery? Taken by Dasce for his personal use? . . . Poor Pallis, poor Pallis.

Gersen looked out over the ocean. A rim of lavender was forming at the horizon, presaging dawn. The stars were fading.

"I've got to face up to it," Ger-

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sen told himself. "It's my responsibility. If she is harmed—but no. I'll kill Hildemar Dasce in any event." Suthiro, treacherous, fox-faced Suthiro, was already as good as dead. And there was Grendel himself, the architect of the entire evil construction. As a Star King he somehow seemed less hateful: a dire beast, which might be expunged without emotion.

Surfeited with hate and grief and misery, he went to the car in the now empty parking area. There, the spot where Dasce had stood. There, where he had lain unconscious—what a wretched, careless fool! How the spirit of his grandfather must writhe in shame!

He started the car, returned to his hotel. There were no messages.

Dawn had come to Avente. Rigel threw wide horizontal fans of light between the distant Catiline Hills and a darkling bank of clouds. Gersen set the alarm dial, dosed himself with a two-hour soporific, threw himself down on the bed.

He awoke to gloom and depression even more intense than before. Time had passed; whatever had been in store for Pallis Atwrode was now fact. Gersen ordered coffee; he could not bring himself to eat.

He considered what he must do. The IPCC? He would be forced to tell everything he knew. Could the IPCC act more efficiently if he laid his information before them? He could tell them that he suspected an administrator of the Sea Province University to be one of the so-called Demon Princes. What then? The IPCC, an elite police force, with the vices and virtues characteristic of such an organization, might or might not be trustworthy. Star Kings had possibly infiltrated the group; in this case Grendel would certainly be warned. And how could the information help rescue Pallis Atwrode? Hildemar Dasce was the kidnapper. Gersen had reported this, and no information could be more explicit.

Another possibility: the exchange of Teehalt's world for Pallis Atwrode.

Gersen would gladly accept the trade — but whom to trade with? He still could not identify Grendel. The IPCC no doubt would have means to detect him. Then what? The exchange would no longer be conceivable. There might be a quiet execution — though the IPCC generally acted only upon the formal request of some authorized governmental agency. And in the meantime, what of Pallis Atwrode? She would be lost — a small delightful spark of life, forgotten

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But if Gersen knew Grendel's identity he would have vastly more leverage. He could make his offer with assurance. The logic of the situation seemed to be that Gersen proceed as before. But how slow! Think of Pallis, poor Pallis! . . .

Nevertheless, Hildemar Dasce had gone Beyond, and no effort of Gersen or of the IPCC could avail against this hard fact. Grendel alone had the power to order his return. If Pallis Atwrode still lived.

The situation had not changed. As before his first urgency was to identify Grendel. Then bargain — or extort.

With his course of action once more clear, Gersen's spirits lifted. More accurately, his resolve and dedication burned at a fervent new heat. Hate gave him a heady, almost drunken, sense of omnipotence. No one, nothing, could withstand emotion so intense!

The hour of his appointment with Detteras, Warweave and Kelle was approaching. Gersen dressed, descended to the garage, slid his car out upon the avenue and headed south.

Arriving at the university, he parked, rode the slide-way to the mall, crossed the quadrangle to the College of Galactic Morphology. Hoping against hope, with sudden quick jerking of the heart, he looked toward the reception desk. A different girl was on duty. He asked politely, "Where is Miss Atwrode this morning?"

"I don't know, sir. She hasn't arrived. Perhaps she's not feeling well."

Perhaps indeed, thought Gersen. He mentioned his appointment and proceeded to the office of Rundel Detteras.

Warweave and Kelle were there before him. The three undoubtedly had reached a decision on a common course of action. Gersen looked from face to face, Detteras to Warweave to Kelle. One of these creatures was human only in appearance. At Smade's Tavern he had glimpsed him. He tried to think back, to visualize, to remember. No image came. Black-dyed skin and exotic costume were a disguise beyond his penetration. Furtively he assessed each. Which? Warweave: aquiline, cold-eyed, arrogant? Kelle: precise, humorless, austere? Or Detteras, whose geniality now seemed insincere and counterfeit?

He could not decide. He forced himself into a pose of studious courtesy, and made his primary gambit. "Let's simplify the whole matter," said Gersen. "I'll buy the decoding-strip. I imagine the college could use a

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thousand SVU. In any event, that's the offer I wish to make."

His adversaries, each in his own style, seemed taken aback. Warweave raised his brows, Kelle stared fixedly, Detteras put on a puzzled half-smile.

Warweave said, "But we understood that you intended to sell what you conceived to be your interest in this matter."

"I don't mind selling," said Gersen. "if you'll offer me enough."

"And how much is enough?"

"A million SVU, perhaps two, or perhaps three, if you'll go that high."

Kelle snorted, Detteras shook his big ugly head.

"Fees of that sort are not paid to locaters," said Warweave.

"Has it been established which of you sent out Teehalt?" asked Gersen.

"What does it matter?" asked Warweave. "Your interest in the affair — money — has become clear enough." He looked from Kelle to Detteras. "Whoever it is has either forgotten or does not care to disclose himself. Doubtless that is the way the situation will remain."

Detteras said, "It's certainly inconsequential. Come now, Mr. Gersen, we have decided to make you a joint offer — certainly not as grandiose as the figure you name—"

"How much?"

"Possibly as much as 5000 SVU."

"Ridiculous. This is an exceptional world."

"You do not know this," Warweave pointed out. "You have not been there, or so you claim."

"More to the point," said Kelle dryly, "neither have we."

"You have seen the photographs," said Gersen.

"Exactly," said Kelle. "We have seen no more. Photographs can be faked without difficulty. I for one do not propose to pay out a large sum on the strength of three photographs."

"Understandable," said Gersen. "But for my part I don't intend to make a move without a guarantee. Don't forget I have suffered a loss. This is my opportunity to make it good."

"Be reasonable!" Detteras urged bluffly. "Without the decoder, the filament is just another spool of wire."

"Not completely. Fourier analysis eventually can break the code."

"In theory. It is a long expensive process."

"Not as expensive as giving the filament away for next to nothing."

The discussion continued an hour, Gersen gritting his teeth in impatience. A price of 100,-

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000 SVU, to be deposited in escrow, was eventually arranged, the sale conditional upon a list of provisos relating to the physical characteristics of the world in question.

Agreement having been reached, telescreen contact with the Bureau of Deeds and Contracts at Avente was made. The four men identified themselves formally and the contract was read into the records.

A second call, to the Bank of Alphanor, established the escrow account.

The three administrators now sat back and inspected Gersen, who in his turn looked from one to the other. "So much is settled. Which of you goes with me to inspect this world?"

The three exchanged glances. "I'll gladly go," said Warweave.

"I was about to volunteer my own services," said Detteras.

"In that case," said Kelle, "I might as well come along too. I'm overdue for a change."

Gersen seethed in frustration. He had expected Grendel to volunteer his services — in fact, to assert them — whereupon Gersen could then take him aside, and offer a new deal: the filament for Pallis Atwrode. What, after all, was the world to him? His single goal was Grendel's identity . . . and after that, his life.

But now this plan had gone by the boards. If all three went out to Teehalt's planet, the identification of Grendel must depend upon new circumstances. Meanwhile the fate of Pallis Atwrode bore no thinking about.

Gersen made a last-ditch protest. "My boat is small for four. Better if only one went out with me."

Detteras threw his hands into the air, turned to the screen, called his secretary. "Cancel all my appointments. Urgent business is taking me out of town. We'll take the departmental ship."

Returning to Avente, Gersen pondered the future. What challenges would he face from these men, one of whom was Grendel? It would be foolhardy not to arrange safeguards: this was the training imposed upon him by his grandfather, a methodical man, who had labored diligently to discipline Gersen's innate tendency to rely upon improvisation.

At the hotel Gersen examined his belongings, made certain selections, then packed and checked out. After painstaking precautions against stick-tights and human trackers, he went to a branch office of the Amalgamated Distribution Service, another of the monster semi-public

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utility companies with agencies throughout the Oikumene. In a booth he consulted catalogues which offered him a choice of a million products produced by thousands of fabricators. Making his choice, he punched the requisite buttons, went to the service counter.

There was a wait of three minutes, while automatic machinery ranged the shelves of the enormous underground warehouse, then the mechanism Gersen had ordered appeared on a belt. He examined it, paid the clerk, departed and rode the subway to the space-port. He inquired the location of the university ship from an attendant, who took him out on a terrace and pointed down the long line of spacecraft, large and small, each in its bay. "Notice, sir, the red and yellow yacht with side platform? Well, count down three. First the CD 16, then the old Parabola, and then a green and blue ship with the big observation dome. That's the job. She's going out today, eh?"

"Yes. About seven. How did you know?"

"One of the crew is already aboard. I had to let him on."

"I see." Gersen went down to the field, walked along the way which led past the ranked spacecraft. From the shadow of the ship in the next bay, he inspected the university ship. The contours were distinctive, as was the rather elaborate emblem at the bow. Recollection stirred at the back of his mind. Somewhere before he had seen this ship. Where? At Smade's Planet on the landing field between mountains and black ocean. It was the ship used by the Star King.

The shape of a man passed in front of one of the observation windows. When he moved out of sight Gersen crossed the space between the two ships.

Cautiously he tried the outer entry port. It eased ajar. He stepped into the transition chamber, peered through the panel into the ship's main saloon. Suthiro the Sarkoy worked at an object which he apparently had attached to the underside of a shelf.

Inside Gersen something more ferocious than gladness—a peculiar exaltation of hate—swelled and burst, suffusing his entire body. He tried the inner portal. It was locked from within. There was, however, an emergency disengagement which would unlock the door if pressure were equalized between cabin and outer atmosphere. Gersen touched the emergency switch. There was an audible click. Within the ship all was silent. Not daring to glance

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through the panel, Gersen pressed his ear to the port. Useless: no sound could pass through the laminated structure. He waited a minute, then carefully eased himself up to look into the cabin once more.

Suthiro had heard nothing. He had gone forward, and now appeared to be adjusting the padding around a stanchion. His heavy flat-skulled head was bent forward, lips pursed out.

Gersen slid back the port, stepped into the cabin, a projac pointed at the big square buckle of Suthiro's steppe-rider harness. "Skop Suthiro," said Gersen. "This is a pleasure for which I had not dared hope."

Suthiro's dog-brown eyes opened and shut; he grinned broadly. "I was waiting for your arrival."

"Indeed. And why?"

"I wanted to continue our discussion of last night."

"We were speaking of Godogma, the Long-Legged Walker, with Wheels on his Feet. Plainly he has wheeled across the path of your life, and you will never drive your wagon over the Gorobundur."

Suthiro became very still, his eyes measuring Gersen.

"What happened to the girl?" asked Gersen gently.

Suthiro considered, then rejected the feasibility of feigning innocence. "She was taken by Fancy Dasce."

"With your connivance. Where is she now?"

Suthiro shrugged. "He had orders to kill her. Why I don't know. I am told very little. Dasce will not kill her until he has the full use of her. He is a *khet*." Suthiro sneered the epithet, a metaphor linking Dasce to the obscenely fecund Sarkovy mink.

"He has left Alphanor?"

"Certainly." Suthiro seemed surprised at Gersen's naivete. "Probably for his little planet." He made a fretful uncomfortable motion, which brought him an imperceptible four inches closer to Gersen.

"Where is this planet?"

"Ha! Do you think he would tell me? Or anyone else?"

"In that case — but I must ask you to stand back."

"Pah," whispered Suthiro in a childish display of petulance. "I can poison you any time I choose."

Gersen allowed a faint smile to cross his lips. "I have already poisoned you."

Suthiro raised his eyebrows. "When? You have never closed with me."

"Last night. I touched you when I handed you paper. Look at the back of your right hand."

Suthiro stared in slow horror at the red weal. "Cluthe!"

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Gersen nodded. "Cluthe."

"But — why should you do this to me?"

"You merit such an end."

Suthiro launched himself like a leopard; the projector in Gersen's hand discharged a stalk of blue-white energy. Suthiro fell to the deck, lay staring up at Gersen. "Better plasma than cluthe," he whispered huskily.

"You'll die by cluthe," said Gersen.

Suthiro shook his head. "Not while I carry my poisons."

"Godogma calls you. So now speak truth. Do you hate Hildemar Dasce?"

"I hate Dasce indeed." Suthiro seemed surprised, as if there were anyone who did not hate Dasce.

"I would kill Dasce."

"Most people would do no less."

"Where is his planet?"

"Beyond. I know no more."

"When are you to see him next?"

"Never. I am dying, and Dasce is bound for a deeper hell than mine."

"If you lived?"

"Never. I was to return to Sarkovy."

"Who knows of this planet?"

"Grendel... Perhaps."

"Is there no one else? Tristano?"

"No. Dasce tells little. The world is airless." Suthiro carefully hunched himself together. "Already the skin begins to itch."

"Listen, Suthiro. You hate Dasce. Yes? And you hate me, for I have poisoned you. Think! You, a Sarkoy, poisoned by me, and so easily."

Suthiro muttered, "I hate you indeed."

"Tell me how to find Dasce, then. One of us must kill the other. The death will be your doing."

Suthiro rocked his furry head in desolation. "But I cannot tell you what I do not know."

"What has he said of his world? Does he talk?"

"He boasts. Dasce is a vile braggart. His world is harsh; only a man like himself could master this world. He lives in the crater of a dead volcano."

"What of the sun?"

Suthiro hunched himself together. "It is dim. Yes. It must be red. They asked Dasce about his face. Why had he dyed himself red? To match his sun, said Dasce, which was the same color, and not much larger."

"A red dwarf," mused Gersen.

"So it might be."

"Think! What else? Which direction? Which constellation? Which sector?"

"He says nothing. And now —

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I do not care. I think only of Godogma. Go away so that I may kill myself decently."

Gersen surveyed the huddled form without emotion. "What are you doing here in the ship?"

Suthiro looked at his hand curiously, then rubbed his chest. "I feel it moving." He examined Gersen. "Well, then, since you would look on my death, watch." He put hands to his neck, convulsed his knuckles. The brown eyes stared. "In thirty seconds now."

"Who would know of Dasce's planet? Has he friends?"

" 'Friends'?" Suthiro even in his last seconds took occasion to sneer.

"Where does he lodge in Avente?"

"North of Sailmaker Beach. In an old hut on Melnoy Heights."

"Who is Grendel? What is his name?"

Suthiro spoke in a whisper. "A Star King has no need for a name."

"What name does he use on Alphano?"

The thick lips opened and closed. Words rattled in the pale throat. "You killed me. Should Dasce fail, let Grendel kill you." The eyelids jerked, quivered. Suthiro lay back, seemed to stiffen, made no further movement and lay still.

Gersen looked down at the body. He walked around behind it, studied it. The Sarkoy were notoriously treacherous and revengeful. With his toe, he attempted to turn the body over on its face. Quick as the strike of a serpent the arm flashed around, poison-prongs ready. Gersen jerked back; the projac ejected a second dazzling line of energy; this time Suthiro was dead.

Gersen searched the corpse. In the pouch he found a sum of money which he tucked into his own wallet. There was a kit of poisons, which Gersen examined, then, unable to comprehend Suthiro's cryptic nomenclature, discarded; also a device no larger than his thumb, intended to project crystalline needles of poison or virus on a jet of compressed air. A man could be infected from a distance of fifty feet and know nothing save a faint tingle. Suthiro carried a projac similar to his own, three stilettos and a packet of fruit lozenges, undoubtedly lethal.

Gersen dropped the weapons back into Suthiro's pouch, dragged the body to a waste ejection locker and crammed it away, out of sight. Once in space, the touch of a button would dispose of Sivij Suthiro the Sarkoy. Next he looked to discover what Suthiro, while alive, had so earnestly been trying to achieve.

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Under the shelf he found a small toggle-switch controlling a set of wires which led to a concealed relay, which in turn activated the valves on four reservoirs of gas at various secret spots around the cabin. Death-gas or anesthetic? He detached one of the reservoirs and found a label printed in the crabbed Sarkoy syllabary: *Tironvirasko's Instantaneous Narcoleptic; an odorless sleep-inducent with minimal postreducts.*

It seemed that Grendel, no less methodical than Gersen, was taking his own precautions.

Gersen took each of the four reservoirs to the entry port, released their contents and replaced them where he had found them. He left Suthiro's switch in place, but changed its function.

This accomplished, Gersen brought out his own device: the timer he had purchased at Amalgamated, and a grenade from his armament.

After a moment's reflection he secured it inside the reactor housing, where it would do maximum damage and yet be convenient in case of need.

He glanced at his watch. One o'clock. Time was growing short. Far too short to accomplish all which must be done. He departed, locking the ship behind him. Returning to the terminal, he took the subway for Sailmaker Beach.

At a stand beside the station Gersen selected a self-service cab — a single-seat scooter, gyroscopically balanced, with a transparent canopy. Two SVU in the slot gave him possession for an hour. Stepping aboard, he drove north through the noisy streets of Sailmaker Beach.

The district had a unique flavor. Avente, a suave cosmopolitan city, was almost indistinguishable from fifty other polities of the Oikumene. Sailmaker Beach resembled no other locale in the known universe. The buildings were low and thick-walled, constructed for the most part of crushed coquina concrete, white or color-washed. In the blazing light of Rigel even pastels seemed intense. For some reason lavender and pale blue, along with white, were the most popular tints. The district was home to scores of off-world nationalities, each forming an enclave with its characteristic food shops, restaurants, specialty houses. Though widely disparate of origin, habit and physiognomy, the inhabitants of the district were uniformly voluble, half-suspicious, half-naive, contemptuous of outsiders and equally contemptuous of each other. They earned their living

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from tourists, as domestic servants or day laborers, as proprietors of small shops and craft studios, as entertainers or musicians in the innumerable taverns, bistros, bordellos, restaurants.

At the north rose Melnoy Heights. Here the architecture changed to tall apartment buildings of almost Gothic elongation, each seeming to peer over the other's shoulder, across Sailmaker Beach to the more conventional districts. In Melnoy Heights Hildemar Dasce reputedly had lodgings. As methodically as shortness of time and anxiety allowed, Gersen sought information regarding Dasce.

There was no Hildemar Dasce listed in the Melnoy Heights Directory — nor had Gersen expected to find one. Dasce undoubtedly would desire privacy and the pose of normality.

Gersen began to visit the taverns, describing the tall man with the split nose, the red skin, the chalk-blue cheeks. He soon encountered folk who had noticed Dasce, but not until the fourth tavern did he find anyone who had spoken with him.

"You must mean Beauty," said the bartender, a stubby orange-skinned man, with russet hair arranged in fine glossy festoons and curls. Gersen stared in fascination at the chain carved from turquoise which looped from a hole in his left nostril to a hole in the lobe of his left ear. "Beauty comes in often to drink. A space man he claims himself, but as to this I can't be certain. I have often declared myself a great lover. All of us lie, as much or more than necessary. 'What is truth?' asks Pons Pilatus, in the fable, and I answer: 'A commodity as cheap as air, which we hide as if it were as precious as yewl-stone.' "

The bartender was disposed to further philosophy. Gersen hauled him back to the issue at hand. "Where does Beauty Dasce house himself?"

"Up the hill, up back." The bartender made a vague gesture. "I can tell you no more, because I know no more."

Gersen rode his scooter up the steep lanes and switchbacks of Melnoy Heights. Inquiry at another tavern, a tiresome series of questions at various shops, lobbies and street-corners, finally resulted in explicit directions to Dasce's lodgings. Riding a little unpaved road which left the area of tall apartments, Gersen circled a steep rocky hillside, where gangs of children scrambled like goats. At the end of the road stood an isolated rectangular cottage, rudely, if substantially, constructed. It commanded a magnificent view over the ocean; over Sailmaker

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Beach; the Grand Esplanade, dwindling far to the south; and, only just perceptible through the haze, the apartment towers of Remo.

Gersen approached the cottage with care, though it exuded the indefinable but unmistakable feeling of vacancy. He walked around peering through the windows, seeing nothing of interest. After a quick glance to right and left, he broke in the sash of an inconspicuous window and cautiously, in the event that Dasce had set man-traps, climbed into the cottage.

The house was strong with the feel of Dasce's habitancy; a faintly acrid odor, together with an aura more subtle than odor, of crudeness, dark pompous magnificent strength. There were four rooms, encompassing the usual functions. Gersen made a quick general investigation, then concentrated his attention upon the parlor.

The ceiling was scrolled plaster, painted pale yellow. The floor was covered by a carpet of greenish-yellow fiber, the walls were a checkerboard of maroon and dark brown hardwood tiles. At the far end Dasce had placed a desk and heavy chair. The wall over the desk was hung with dozens of photographs: Dasce in all poses, against every variety of background. There was Dasce in startling close-up, revealing every pore of his skin, the split cartilage of his nose, the lidless blue eyes. There was Dasce in the costume of a Bernal flame-fighter — varnished black plates and horns and cusps and prongs, like a titanic stag beetle. There was Dasce in a palanquin of yellow rattan, hung with persimmon silk, borne on the shoulders of six black-haired maidens.

The angle of the wall displayed a set of photographs of a man who was not Dasce. Apparently they had been taken over a period of years. The first showed the face of a man thirty years old: a sturdy, confident, bulldog face, serene, even complacent. The face had changed alarmingly in the second of the photographs. The cheeks were sunken, the eyes started from their sockets, the nerves at the temples showed in an intricate mesh. In each succeeding photograph the face became ever more haggard... Gersen glanced along a row of books: pornography of a childishly obscene nature, weapon manuals, an index to Sarkoy poisons, a late edition of *Handbook to the Planets*, an index to Dasce's micro-book library, a *Star Directory*.

The desk itself was extremely handsome: side panels of dark wood carved to represent griffins

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and winged serpents in a jungle; the surface an exquisite inlay of opals polished flat. Gersen checked the drawers and pigeonholes. They were barren of information — completely empty, in fact. Gersen stood back, a tide of grim despair rising within him. He looked at his watch. In four hours he must meet Detteras, Warweave and Kelle at the space-port. He stood in the center of the room, carefully scrutinized every article. Somewhere must be a link with Dasce's secret planet; how to recognize it?

He went to the book-shelf, took down the *Star Directory*, examined the lay of the binding. If Dasce's red dwarf were listed he certainly must have located it in the directory. If he had done so several times, there might be a crease, a smear, a discoloration. No such mark was visible. Gersen held the book by its two covers, let it hang. A third through the book the pages separated a hair-breadth. Gersen carefully opened the book at this spot, looked down the listing. Each star — and on this page there were two hundred — was described under eleven headings: index number, constellation placement as viewed from Earth, star type, planetary information, mass, vector of velocity, diameter, density, location coordinates, remarks.

Twenty-three red dwarfs were listed. Eight of these were double. Eleven hung solitary in space, forlorn feeble sparks. Four were accompanied by planets, eight planets in all. These four Gersen scrutinized with especial care. Reluctantly he was forced to conclude that none of these planets could conceivably be considered habitable. Five of the planets were too hot, one was completely awash in liquid methane, two were too massive to allow human toleration of the gravity. Gersen's mouth drooped in disappointment. Nothing. Still, the page at one time had been earnestly consulted: there must be information here which Dasce needed or valued. Gersen tore the page from the book.

The front door opened; Gersen whirled. In the opening stood a middle-aged man no larger than a boy of ten. His head was round. His eyes brimmed with curiosity, flicking over Gersen and around the room. He had large features, long pointed ears, a heavy protuberant mouth: a Highland Imp from the Highlands of Krokinole, one of the more specialized races of the Concourse. He came forward, fearlessly swaggering. "Who are you that's in Mr. Spock's house? Looking through Mr. Spock's things? A burglar, I think."

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Gersen replaced the book, and the Imp said, "That's one of his precious volumes, that bit of stuff. Not likely he wants your fingers all over it. I'd better go for the constable."

"Come back here," said Gersen. "Who are you?"

"I'm the by-your-leave caretaker, that's who I am. Also this is my land and my house and my freehold. Mr. Spock is the man I let to, and why should I give every burglar north of Swansea leave to pillage and loot?"

"Mr. Spock is a criminal," said Gersen.

"And if he is, it's proof then that there's no honor among thieves."

"I'm no thief," said Gersen mildly. "The IPCC is after your tenant, Mr. Spock."

The Imp bent his big head forward. "Be you IPCC? Show me your blazer."

On the assumption that a Krokinole Imp would not recognize an IPCC blazer when he saw one, Gersen displayed a transparent tablet, with his photograph under a gold seven-pointed star. He touched it to his forehead and it glowed into light, a factitious display which impressed the Imp. He instantly became effusive in his cordiality. "Never did think that Mr. Spock was up to good. He'll come to a bad end, mark my words! What's he done now?"

"Kidnap. Murder."

"Bad deeds, both. I'll have to caution Mr. Spock."

"He is a wicked man. How long has he lived here?"

"Donkey's years."

"You know him well, then?"

"Well indeed. Who drinks with him when everyone else turns their heads as if Mr. Spock smelt poorly? Me. I drink with him, and frequently. I have my compassion."

"So you're Spock's friend?"

The big features twisted and moved in successive displays of tolerance, crafty speculation, virtuous indignation. "I? Certainly not. Do I look the sort who consorts with criminals?"

"But — let us say — you have heard Spock talking."

"That I have, and oh the tales he tells!" The Imp's eyes rolled ludicrously upward. "Do I believe him? No."

"Has he ever spoken of a secret world where he has a hideaway?"

"Again and again. He calls it Thumbnail Gulch. Why? He always shakes his head when he's asked. A tight-mouthed man, Mr. Spock, for all his loose braggadocio."

"What more has he said of his world?"

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The Imp shrugged. "The sun's blood-red, hardly enough to keep him warm."

"And where is this world?"

"Aha! That's where he's sly. No word of this will he speak. Many the time I've wondered, thinking that suppose poor Mr. Spock took sick on this lonesome world — who'd know to tell his friends?"

Gersen smiled grimly. "And this argument never induced him to confide in you?"

"Never. Why do you wish to know?"

"He's kidnaped an innocent young woman and taken her to this world."

"The rogue. What a raffish creature." The Imp shook his head in distress, from which a certain measure of wistful envy was not absent. "I'll never let my land and house to him again."

"Think. What has Spock said regarding the world?"

The Imp screwed up his eyes. "Thumbnail Gulch. The world is bigger than the sun. Astonishing, no?"

"If the sun is a red dwarf, not too astonishing."

"Volcanos. There are live volcanos on this world."

"Volcanos? That's odd. A red dwarf's planet shouldn't have volcanos. It's too old."

"Old or young, the volcanos thrive. Mr. Spock lives in a dead crater, and he sees a whole line of volcanos smoking up along the horizon."

"What else?"

"Nought."

"How long does it take to get to his planet?"

"That I can't say."

"You've never met any of his friends?"

"Toss-pots at the tavern, no more. But yes. One. Less than a year ago—an Earthman, a heavy cruel man."

"Tristano?'

"I know nothing of his name. Mr. Spock had just returned from a business trip Beyond, to a planet called New Hope. Do you know it?"

"I've never been there."

"Nor I, though I've wandered far. But the very day of his return, while we sit in Gelperino's Saloon, the Earthman comes in. 'Where have you been?' he asks. 'Ten days I've been here, and we left New Hope together.' Mr. Spock gives him his haughty look. 'If you must know, I looked in on my little hideaway for half a day. I have obligations there, you know.' And the Earthman said no more."

Gersen thought a moment and suddenly was in a hurry to leave. "What more do you know about Spock?"

"Nothing more."

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Gersen made a last survey of the house, under the inquisitive scrutiny of the Imp, then departed, ignoring the Imp's sudden harsh demands for damages when he discovered the broken window sash. Hastily, now, Gersen rode down through the winding avenues, across Sailmaker Beach, back into central Avente. He went to an office of the Universal Technical Consultative Service, and gained the attention of an operator.

"Set up this problem," said Gersen. "Two ships leave the planet New Hope. One proceeds directly here, to Avente. The other goes to a red dwarf star, spends half a day, then comes to Avente, arriving ten days later. I want a list of the red dwarf stars which this second ship might have visited in the nine and a half days."

The operator considered. "There is obviously an ellipsoid shell here, the foci being New Hope and Alphanor. We must take into account the accelerations and decelerations, the probable coast periods and landing times. There will necessarily be a locus of most probability, and areas of diminishing probability."

"Set up the problem so that the machine lists these stars in order of probability."

"To what limits?"

"Oh — one chance in fifty. Include also the constants of these stars as given in the directory here."

"Very well, sir. The fee will be 25 SVU."

Gersen brought forth money; the operator translated the problem into precise language, spoke into a microphone. Thirty seconds later a sheet of paper dropped from a slot. The operator glanced at it, signed his name, handed it without a word to Gersen.

Forty-three stars were listed. Gersen compared the list with the page he had torn from Dasce's *Directory*. A single star occurred on both lists. Gersen frowned in puzzlement. The star was a member of a binary, without planets. The couple was... Naturally! thought Gersen, illumination flooding his mind. How else could volcanos exist on the companion of a red dwarf? Dasce's world was not a planet, but a dark star: a dead surface, perhaps still faintly warm. Gersen had heard of such worlds. Usually they were too dense, too massive for human occupancy, but if a small star in the course of two or three billion years happened to sweep up enough detritus to build a thick shell of light material the surface gravity might well be reduced to a tolerable level.

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At ten minutes to seven Kelle, Warweave and Detteras appeared at the space-port, wearing spacemen's harness, their skins washed the blue-brown tone which originally, in popular credence, was thought to protect the human organism from certain mysterious Jarnell effluviae, and which by usage had become a normal adjunct to the space-traveler's accoutrements. They halted in the middle of the lobby, looked about, spied Gersen, turned to face him as he approached.

Gersen surveyed them with a dour smile. "We seem to be ready, all of us. I thank you gentlemen for your promptness."

"Achieved at great inconvenience to all of us," stated Kelle.

"In due course the reason for haste will become clear," said Gersen. "Your luggage?"

"On its way to the ship," said Detteras.

"Then we will leave. We have clearance?"

"Everything has been arranged," said Warweave.

The group proceeded from the lobby, walked around to the docking area, toward which a crane was already trundling.

The luggage, four large cases and as many smaller packets, was stacked beside the ship. Warweave unlocked the entry ports; Gersen and Kelle passed the cases into the cabin. Detteras made a bluff attempt to assert command. "We have four compartments aboard. I'll take forward starboard; Kelle, you'll have starboard aft; Warweave, port forward; Gersen, port aft. We might as well move our luggage out of the cabin."

"One moment," said Gersen. "There is a situation that we must resolve before we proceed any further."

Detteras's big face creased in a scowl. "What?"

"We are two parties of interest here — at least two parties. Neither trusts the other. We are going Beyond, past the edge of law. All of us, recognizing this fact, have brought weapons. I propose that we lock all weapons in the security cabinet; that we open the luggage, and if necessary, strip ourselves naked, to assure each other that all the weapons have been declared. Since you are three to my one, if any advantage lies to either side, it is to yours."

"A highly undignified process," grumbled Detteras.

Kelle, more equable now than Gersen could have believed, said, "Come now, Rundle. Gersen is merely verbalizing reality. In short, I agree with him. The more so since I carry no weapons."

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Warweave made a careless gesture. "Search me, search my luggage; but let's get under way."

Detteras shook his head, opened his case, withdrew a projac of great power, tossed it upon the table. "I have my doubts about the wisdom of this. I have nothing against Mr. Gersen personally — but suppose he takes us to a far planet where he has accomplices waiting, who capture us and hold us for ransom? Stranger crimes have occurred."

Gersen laughed. "If you consider this a real danger you need only remain here. I don't care whether one goes or all go."

"What of your own weapons?" asked Warweave dryly.

Gersen brought forth his projac, a pair of stilettos, a dagger, four grenades the size of walnuts.

"My word," said Detteras. "You maintain quite an armament."

"I occasionally have need for it," said Gersen. "Now, the luggage..." The accumulated arms were placed in a cabinet which was secured with four locks, each man retaining a key to one of the locks.

The crane trundled up to the ship; the boom swung around. Hooks engaged in trammels; the ship jerked, hung free, was carried out on the field.

Detteras went to the main console and touched a button, which flashed a row of green lights. "Everything ready to go," he said. "Tanks full, machinery in order."

Kelle cleared his throat, brought forth a handsomely mounted wooden case, bound in red leather. "This is one of the departmental rationalizers. You have Mr. Teehalt's filament, I assume?"

"Yes," said Gersen. "I have the filament with me. But there is no hurry. Before we engage the monitor we must reach zero base-point, which is far distant."

"Very well," said Detteras. "What are the coordinates?"

Gersen brought forward a slip of paper. "If you will allow me," he said politely, "I will make the settings on the auto-pilot."

With ill grace Detteras rose to his feet. "It seems to me that there is no longer reason for distrust. We have stripped ourselves of our weapons, all the issues have been settled. So let us all relax and behave amicably."

"With pleasure," said Gersen.

The ship was lowered to the launching pad, the crane disengaged and rolled away. The group settled themselves into take-off seats; Detteras started the automatic launching sequence. There was a jar, a sense of acceleration, and Alphanor retreated below.

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X

From the chapter *Grendel the Monster,* in the book THE DEMON PRINCES, by Caril Carphen, published by Elucidarian Press, New Wexford, Aloysius, Vega:

. . . In our cursory summary we have seen how each Demon Prince is unique and highly individuated, each displaying his characteristic style.

This is all the more remarkable, in that the basic variety of possible crimes is limited and can be numbered on the fingers. There is crime for gain: extortion, robbery (which includes piracy and raids on settled communities), swindling in its infinite guises. There is slavery, with its various manifestations: procuring, selling, and using slaves. Murder, coercion and torture are merely adjuncts to these activities. The personal depravities are are equally limited, and can be classified under sexual debauchery, sadism, violent acts prompted by pique, vindictiveness, revenge, or vandalism.

Doubtless the catalogue is incomplete, perhaps even illogical, but this is by the blow. I merely wish to display the basic paucity, in order to illustrate this point: that each of the Demon Princes, in inflicting one or another atrocity, impresses the act with his own style, and seems to create a new crime.

In the previous chapters we have examined the maniacal Kokor Hekkus and his theories of absolute frightfulness; the devious Viole Falushe, voluptuary, sybarite, and amateur of kinaesthetics.

Completely distinctive is Grendel the Monster, in style and mannerism. Rather than enlarging himself, projecting a macroscopic delineation of his person and deeds, to mesmerize his victims and intimidate his enemies, Grendel prefers the possibly equalling chilling device of silence, invisibility, dispassionate impersonality. There is no reliable description of Grendel. Certainly Grendel is a cognomen, derived from a folk-epic of ancient Earth. He acts with implacable viciousness, although his cruelties are never wanton, and if he maintains a pleasure-palace after the style of Viole Falushe or Howard Alan Treesong, it is a well-guarded secret.

Grendel's activities are primarily extortion and slavery. In the Conclave of 1500 at Smade's Planet, where five Demon Prince and a score of lesser operators met to define and circumscribe their activities, Grendel was allotted that sector of the Beyond centered on Ferrier's Cluster. It included over a hundred settle-

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ments, towns and vicinities, upon all of which Grendel levies assessments. He rarely encounters protest or complaint, for he need merely cite the example of Mount Pleasant, a town of 5000 persons, which declined to meet his demands. In the year 1499 Grendel invited four other Princes to join him. The junta swept down upon the town, captured and enslaved the entire population.

On the planet Grabhorne he maintains a plantation of about ten thousand square miles, with a slave population estimated at twenty thousand. Here are carefully tilled farms, factories which build exquisite furniture, musical instruments and electronic mechanisms. The slaves are not overtly ill-treated, but working-hours are long, the dormitories are drab, social opportunities are restricted. Punishment is a term in the mines, which few survive.

Grendel's attention is usually wide and dispassionate, but he often focuses upon some individual. The planet Caro lies in an area which none of the Demon Princes claim. Mayor Janous Paragiglia of the city Desde espoused and advocated a militia and space-navy sufficient to protect Caro, and to seek out and destroy Grendel or any other of the Demon Princes who dared to attack Caro. Grendel kidnaped Janous Paragiglia and tortured him for thirty-nine days, telecasting the entire process to the cities of Caro, to all the planets in his own sector and, in one of his rare acts of bravado, to the Rigel Concourse.

As mentioned, his personal appetites are unknown. A rumor frequently encountered runs to the effect that Grendel enjoys engaging in personal gladiatorial duels with able-bodied enemies, with swords for weapons. Grendel is said to exhibit superhuman strength and dexterity, and seems to derive a satisfaction from slowly hewing his opponent to bits.

Like certain other Demon Princes, Grendel maintains a discrete and respectable identity within the Oikumene, and if whispers are correct, occupies a prestigious position on one of the major worlds. . .

Alphanor became a misty pale disk, mingled with the stars. Within the ship the four men settled into an uneasy accommodation. Kelle and Warweave started a quiet conversation. Detteras stared forward into star-spattered emptiness. Gersen watched the three men.

One of them was a simulated man, Grendel the Monster. Which?

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Gersen thought he knew.

There was still no certainty in his mind; his conjecture was based on indications, probabilities, suppositions. Grendel, for his part, must still feel secure in his incognito. He had no reason to suspect Gersen's objective. He must still consider Gersen no more than an acquisitive locater out to drive as hard a bargain as he could. So much the better, thought Gersen, if it would help him to a sure identification. He wanted only the freedom of Pallis Atwrode and the death of Grendel. And of course, of Hildemar Dasce. If Pallis Atwrode were dead — so much the worse for Dasce.

Surreptitiously Gersen watched his suspect. Was this man Grendel? It was frustrating to be so close to his goal. Grendel of course had his own plans. Behind the human skull worked thought-patterns incommensurable with his own, moving toward a goal still obscure.

Gersen could define at least three areas of uncertainty in the situation. First, did Grendel still carry weapons or have access to weapons previously concealed aboard the ship? A possibility, although Grendel might be relying entirely on the hidden tanks of anesthetic gas.

Second, were either or both of the other men his accomplices? Again a possibility, but distinctly less strong.

Third, and a less simple set of circumstances: what would happen when the ship reached Dasce's dead star? Here again variables piled on variables. Did Grendel know of Dasce's hideaway? If so, would he recognize it by sight? The answers here were both *Probably yes.*

The question then would be how to surprise and either capture or kill Hildemar Dasce with out hindrance from Grendel.

Gersen reached a decision. Detteras had urged the need for amicability. One thing was sure: amicability would be sternly tested before long.

Time passed. A wary routine was established. Gersen chose a propitious time and gave the body of Suthiro to space. The ship slid effortlessly past shining stars, at astounding speed, by means only vaguely comprehensible to the men who controlled it.

The pale of human civilization and law came to an end. The ship passed Beyond and struck up and out toward the dwindling fringes of the galaxy. Gersen kept steady if discreet surveillance over his three shipmates, wondering who would first show concern, anxiety or suspicion as to the immediate destination.

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This person was Kelle, though any of the three might have been muttering together out of Gersen's hearing. "Where the devil are we headed?" Kelle inquired peevishly. "This is no area to attract a locater. We're practically in intergalactic space."

Gersen took up a relaxed position. "I have not been altogether candid with you three gentlemen."

Three faces turned swiftly, three pairs of eyes bored in at him.

"What do you mean?" grated Detteras.

"It is not a serious matter. I have been compelled to make a detour. After I perform a certain errand, we will proceed with our original plans." He raised his hand as Detteras took a deep breath. "It serves no purpose to admonish me. The situation is unavoidable."

Warweave spoke in an icy voice: "What is this 'situation'?"

"I'll be glad to explain, and I'm sure all of you will appreciate my predicament. First of all, I seem to have made an enemy of a well-known criminal. He is known as Grendel the Monster." Gersen glanced from face to face. "Doubtless you all have heard of him. He is one of the Demon Princes. The day before we left one of his lieutenants, a creature named Hildemar Dasce, kidnaped a young woman I happen to be interested in, and conveyed her to a private world. I feel obligated to this young woman. She is suffering through no fault of her own, but merely from Grendel's desire to punish or intimidate me. I believe I have located Dasce's planet. I plan to rescue this young woman, and I hope for your cooperation."

Detteras spoke in a voice thick with rage, "Why could you not have told us of your plans before we left? You insisted on leaving, you forced us to break our engagements at great inconvenience—"

Gersen said mildly, "You have some cause for resentment but, since my own time is limited, I thought it best to combine the two projects." He grinned as Detteras's neck swelled in new fury.

Kelle said meditatively, "The kidnaper has conveyed the young woman to a world in this vicinity?"

"I think so. I hope so."

"And you expect our help in rescuing this young woman?"

"Only in a passive sense. Just don't interfere."

"Suppose the kidnaper kills you."

"The possibility exists. But I have the advantage of surprise. He must feel completely secure, and probably I will have no

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great trouble overpowering him."

"'Overpowering' him?" inquired Warweave, delicately sardonic.

"Overpowering or killing him."

At this moment the Jarnell kicked out, the ship whined down into ordinary velocities. Ahead glowed a dim red star. If it were double, its companion was yet invisible.

Gersen said, "As I say, surprise is my most important asset, so therefore I must ask that none of you through inadvertence or malice use the radio." Gersen already had disabled the radio, but he saw no reason to put Grendel on his guard. "I'll explain my plans so that there can be no misunderstanding. First, I'll bring the ship close enough to inspect the surface of the planet, but far enough out to avoid radar detection. If I locate Dasce's habitation, I'll go to the far side of the world, approach the surface and land as close to Dasce's dwelling as feasible. Then I'll take the platform flyer and do what must be done. The three of you need only wait till I return. Then we shall be once more on our way to Teehalt's planet. I know I can count on your cooperation, because I naturally shall take the monitor filament with me, and hide it somewhere. If I am killed, the filament will be lost. Naturally I will need the weapons which are now in the security locker, but I see no reason why you should object to that."

No one spoke. Gersen studied their faces and laughed inwardly. Grendel was posed with a maddening dilemma. If he should interfere and by some means warn Dasce, then Gersen might well be killed, and Grendel's hopes of acquiring Teehalt's planet dashed. Would he trade Dasce for the planet? Gersen was certain of his decision; Grendel was notoriously callous.

Detteras heaved a deep sigh. "Gersen, you're a subtle man. You've put us in a position where for motives of sweet reason we are forced to do your bidding."

"I assure you that my motives are irreproachable."

"Yes, yes, the damsel in distress. All very well; we would not deny her the chance of rescue. My exasperation is not at your goals — if you have told us the truth — but at your lack of candor."

With nothing to lose, Gersen became contrite. "Yes, perhaps I should have explained more carefully. But I am accustomed to working by myself. In any event, the situation is now as I have described it. Do I have the cooperation of you all?"

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"Humph," said Warweave. "We have little choice, as you are perfectly well aware."

"Mr. Kelle?" asked Gersen.

Kelle inclined his head.

"Mr. Detteras?"

"As Warweave points out, we have no choice."

"In that case I will proceed with my plans. The world on which we are to land is a dead star, not a planet."

"What about the gravity? Won't it make habitation inconvenient?" asked Kelle.

"We'll know very shortly."

Warweave turned away, went to look out at the nearing red dwarf.

The dark companion now had became visible. It was a large brown-gray disk, three times the diameter of Alphanor, mottled and reticulated in black and umber. Gersen was pleased to find surrounding space rich in detritus. The radar screen indicated dozens of minuscule planetoids and moonlets in orbits about each star. Gersen could approach the dead star boldly with small fear of detection. A momentary shift into intersplit braked the ship; another brought it to a state of lazy drifting a quarter-million miles above the now looming mass.

The surface seemed dim and featureless, with vast areas covered by what seemed oceans of chocolate-colored dust. The outline of the world was sharp and stark against the black of space, indicating a sparse atmosphere. Gersen went to the macroscope to inspect the surface. The world's relief leapt into perspective. Chains of volcanic mountains netted the surface; there was a mesh of rifts and crevasses, a number of ancient isolated plutonic buttes, hundreds of volcanos, some active, others dead or quiescent.

Gersen set cross-bars on a short sharp peak at the demarcation between day and night. The object seemed not to move relative to the line of darkness: apparently the world held a constant face to its companion. In such case, Dasce's dwelling would almost certainly be on the bright face, probably near the equator, at the longitude directly under the sun. He scrutinized the region carefully, under high magnification. The area was large. There were dozens of volcanic craters, large and small.

Gersen searched an hour. Warweave, Kelle and Detteras stood watching him with varying degrees of impatience and sardonic dislike.

Gersen reviewed his logic; it seemed to hang together. The red dwarf had been listed on a well-used page in Dasce's *Directory;*

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it was found within the requisite ellipsoidal shell: it had a dark star companion. This *must* be the star. And by every likelihood Dasce's crater must be located somewhere within the warm sunlit area below.

An odd formation attracted his attention: a square plateau, with five mountain ranges radiating like the fingers of a hand. A phrase of the Melnoy Heights Imp occurred to him: "Thumbnail Gulch". At fullest magnification Gersen examined the area corresponding to the thumbnail. Certainly there was a small crater here. Certainly it seemed to show a slightly different color, a slightly different texture than the others. And there where the sunlight struck glancingly on the inside wall, a glint? And below, the faint shine of white?

Gersen reduced the magnification to study the surrounding terrain. Even though Dasce might not detect approaching ships at planetary distances, his radar might warn him of someone approaching for a landing. If he dropped down on the far side of the world, slanted in behind the horizon, to land behind the plateau which formed the palm of the hand, he might well be able to surprise Dasce.

He fed the necessary information into the course computer, engaged the autopilot. The ship veered and began its descent.

Kelle, unable to contain his curiosity, asked, "Well? Have you found what you were looking for?"

"I think so," said Gersen.

"If you are careless enough to be killed," said Kelle, "you will put us to enormous inconvenience."

Gersen nodded. "This is essentially what I meant to convey to you a short while ago. I am sure that you'll help me, at least passively."

"We have already agreed to this."

The dark star loomed below. The ship landed on a shelf of naked brown stone, a quarter mile from a heave of low black hills. The stone was the texture of brick. The surrounding plain displayed a surface resembling dried brown mud.

Overhead the red dwarf bulked large. The ship cast a dense black shadow. A thin wind blew small curls of dust across the plain, sifting a greenish blue powder into long herringbone drifts.

Detteras said thoughtfully, "You know, I think it only fair that you leave the filament here. Why victimize us?"

"I don't plan to be killed, Mr. Detteras."

"Your plans might go awry."

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"If so, your troubles will seem very trivial in comparison to mine. May I have my weapons?"

The locker was opened. The three watched warily while Gersen armed himself. He looked from face to face. In the mind of one of these men, feverish plots were hatching. Would he act as Gersen anticipated — which was to say, by not acting?

Here was a chance Gersen must take. Suppose he were wrong. Suppose this were not Dasce's planet and Grendel knew it; suppose Grendel through some intuition suspected Gersen's goals —he might be ready to sacrifice his hopes of acquiring Teehalt's world in order to maroon Gersen out here on this dark star. There was a precaution Gersen could take; it would be foolish for him not to do so. He stepped back into the engine room and detached a small but vital component from the energy reactor. He tucked it into his pouch along with the filament.

Warweave, standing in the doorway, observed the act but made no comment.

Gersen dressed himself in an air-suit and left the ship. Opening the forward hatch he winched down the little platform flyer, loaded aboard a spare air-suit and spare tanks of oxygen, and without further ceremony set out for Thumbnail Gulch, skimming low to the ground, the thin atmosphere keening over the wind-screen.

The landscape was odd even to one accustomed to the terrain of strange planets: a dark spongy surface in varying shades of maroon, brown and gray, marred here and there by volcanic cones and low wallowing black hills. This might be true star-stuff — clinker remaining after the fires had died — or it might be sediment swept up from space. More likely, both. Gersen wondered, did the awareness that he was traversing the surface of a dead star contribute to the sense of weirdness and unreality? The thin atmosphere allowed absolute clarity of vision. The horizons were far, the panorama seemed endless. And overhead, the glowering sphere of the red dwarf, filling an eighth of the sky.

The ground shouldered up to become the plateau, which comprised the palm of the hand, a titanic flow of lava. Gersen swerved to the right. Far ahead he could see a line of black hills lying across the landscape like the back of a monstrous petrified triceratops. This was the "thumb", at the end of which rose Dasce's volcano. Gersen flew low to the ground, taking advantage of all possible cover,

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swerving in and out, close to the wall of the plateau, and so approached the line of jagged black peaks.

Slowly, cautiously, Gersen eased up the tumbled slopes, jets muffled by the thin air to no more than a mutter. Dasce might have installed detectors along these slopes. But it seemed hardly likely. Dasce would consider the effort superfluous. Why attack by land when a torpedo from space would be easier?

Gersen gained the ridge. There two miles ahead, was the volcano which he hoped to be Dasce's hideaway. Off to the side, down on the plain which continued on and on indefinitely, was the most welcome sight of Gersen's experience: a small space-boat.

His hypothesis had been correct. Here was Thumbnail Gulch in all certainty; here would be found Hildemar Dasce. And Pallis Atwrode?

Gersen landed the platform and continued on foot, taking advantage of all possible cover, avoiding approaches where detectors would be most likely. He mounted the slopes of mingled basalt, obsidian and tuff. Reaching the lip of the crater, he peered cautiously over — out on a webbed dome constructed of thin cables, transparent film, held distended by air pressure. The crater was not large: fifty yards in diameter and almost perfectly cylindrical, the walls being formed of striated volcanic glass.

At the bottom of the crater Dasce had made a careless gesture at landscaping. There was a pond of brackish water, a clump of palm trees, a tangle of rank vines.

In the center of the crater was a cage, and in the cage sat a naked man. Tall, haggard, his face was a ghastly wreck, his body crooked, marked with a hundred welts. Gersen remembered Suthiro's explanation of how Dasce lost his eyelids. Looking again he remembered the photographs in Dasce's parlor. This man was the subject of the photographs.

Gersen looked elsewhere. Directly below was a pavilion of black cloth, a series of connected tents. There was no sign of Hildemar Dasce. Entrance to the crater was apparently by way of a tunnel leading through the wall of the volcano.

Gersen moved carefully around the lip, looked down over the slope. The porous brown-black plain extended limitlessly off in three directions. Nearby rested the space-boat, seeming no larger than a toy in the clarity of the atmosphere.

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Gersen turned his attention back to the dome. With a knife he cut a small slit in the film, then settled himself to watch.

Ten minutes passed before the pressure-drop activated a warning signal. Then out from one of the tents charged Hildemar Dasce.

He wore only loose white pantaloons. His torso, stained a faded purple, was ribbed with muscle. He stared up with lidless eyes, the blue cheeks blooming from the vermilion face.

Dasce marched across the crater floor. The prisoner within the cage followed him attentively with his gaze.

Dasce vanished from sight. Gersen hid in a crevice. Dasce presently emerged on the plain in an air-suit, carrying a case. He mounted the crater wall with strong easy strides, passing close by Gersen.

Dasce put down the case, brought forth a projector, swept a beam of radiation over the surface of the dome. The escaping air, evidently dosed with a fluorescent agent, glowed yellow. Dasce went to the cut and bent over it, and Gersen felt his instant suspicion. He straightened up, looked all around, and Gersen crouched back out of sight.

When he looked once more, Dasce was at work mending the rip with cement and a new strip of film. The entire operation required but a minute. Then Dasce replaced the unused material and the projector into the case and straightened up. He made another careful scrutiny of rim, slope and plain; then, suspicion blunted, he started back down the slope.

Gersen rose from his hiding place and followed, not fifty feet behind.

Dasce, jumping from rock to rock down the slope, failed to look back — until Gersen dislodged a rock which bounded ahead and past. Dasce stopped, turned sharply. Gersen was out of sight behind a jut of rock.

Dasce proceeded. Gersen followed close behind. At the base of the slope a sound, a vibration, alarmed Dasce. Once more he turned to look up-slope — directly at the figure bounding down on him. Gersen saw the loose pale mouth open in startlement, and then he struck. Dasce toppled, rolled, bounded to his feet, started to run awkwardly for the air-lock; Gersen fired at the back of one of the rangy thighs. Dasce fell.

Gersen seized him by the ankles, dragged him into the air-lock, slammed the outer door. Dasce struggled and kicked, the red and blue face hideously contorted. Gersen pointed the pro-

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jac, but Dasce merely tried to kick it from his grasp. Gersen fired again, numbing Dasce's other leg. Dasce lay still, glaring like a boar at bay. With a roll of tape brought hopefully for the purpose, Gersen lashed Dasce's ankles. Then warily he seized the right arm, bent it back and around. Dasce was forced over on his face. Presently, after a struggle, his arms were taped behind his back.

The lock mechanism automatically had filled the space with air. Gersen now removed the vitrine globe from Dasce's head.

"We renew our acquaintance," said Gersen in a pleasant voice.

Dasce said nothing.

Gersen dragged him out into the floor of the crater. The prisoner jumped to his feet, pressed himself to the bars of the cage and stared at Gersen as if he were an archangel, with wings, trumpet and aureole.

Gersen assured himself as to the security of Dasce's bonds, ran over to the tent, projac ready for an unexpected servitor or comrade-in-arms of Dasce's. The prisoner looked after him with unbelieving eyes.

Pallis Atwrode lay huddled under a limp dirty sheet, face to the wall. There was no one else. Gersen touched her on the shoulder, and fascinatedly watched her flesh crawl. "Pallis," he said. "Pallis — it's Kirth Gersen." The words reached her, muffled by the globe which Gersen still wore; she only crouched and huddled more tightly. Gersen rolled her over. She lay with her eyes shut. Her face, once so gay and impudent and charming, was bleak. "Pallis," called Gersen, "open your eyes. It's Kirth Gersen! You're safe!"

She shook her head slightly, her eyes tight shut.

Gersen turned away. At the door to the tent he looked back. Her eyes were wide open, staring in wonder, but she instantly closed them again.

Gersen left her, investigated the entire crater, reassured himself that no one else was present and returned to Dasce.

"Nice place you've got here, Dasce," said Gersen in a conversational tone. "A little hard to find when your friends want to drop in."

"How did you find me?" said Dasce in a guttural voice. "No one knows of this place."

"Except your boss."

"He doesn't know."

"How do you think I found out?"

Dasce was silent. Gersen went to the cage, unbarred the door and motioned to the prisoner, wondering whether the man's mind had also failed him. "Come out."

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The prisoner limped haltingly forward. "Who are you?"

"No matter. You are free."

" 'Free'?" The man worked his loose jaws over the word, turned to look toward Dasce. He spoke in a reverent voice. "What of *him?*"

"I shall kill him presently."

The man said softly, "This must be a dream."

Gersen returned to Pallis. She was sitting on the bed, the sheet clutched around her. Her eyes were open. She looked at Gersen, rose to her feet, and fainted.

Gersen lifted her, carried her out to the crater floor. The erstwhile captive stood looking at Dasce from a respectful distance. Gersen spoke to him. "What is your name?"

The man looked momentarily bewildered. "I am Robin Rampold," he said in a soft hushed voice. "And you — you are *his* enemy?"

"I am his executioner."

"It is a marvel!" breathed Rampold. "After so long that I cannot remember the beginning..." Tears began to course down his cheeks. He looked at the cage, walked over to it, studied it, then looked back at Gersen. "I know this place well. Each crack, each crevice, each fleck and crystal of the metal." His voice faded. Suddenly he asked, "What is the year?"

"1524."

Rampold seemed to become smaller. "I did not know it was so long. I have forgotten so much." He looked up toward the dome. "There is no day or night here — nothing but the red sun. When *he* is gone, there are no events... Seventeen years I have stood in that cage. And now I am out." He walked over to Dasce, stood looking down at him. Gersen followed. Rampold said, "Long, long ago we were two different people. I taught him a lesson. I made him suffer. The memory is all that has kept me alive."

Dasce laughed a harsh cackle. "I have sought to repay you." He glanced up toward Gersen. "Best kill me while you can, or I will do the same."

Gersen stood reflecting. Dasce must die. There would be no compunction when the time came. But behind the red forehead was knowledge which Gersen needed. How to extract this knowledge? Torture? Gersen suspected that Dasce would laugh while being torn limb from limb. Trickery? Subtlety? He looked speculatively down into the course red and blue face. Dasce did not flinch. Gersen turned to Rampold. "Can you navigate Dasce's space-boat?"

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Rampold sadly shook his head.

"Then I suppose you must come with me."

Rampold spoke in a tremulous voice, "What of *him?*"

"Eventually I'll kill him."

Rampold said in a low voice, "Give him to me."

"No." Gersen returned to the inspection of Dasce. Somehow he must be made to reveal the identity of Grendel. A direct question would be worse than useless. "Dasce," he asked, "why did you bring Pallis Atwrode out here?"

"She was too beautiful to kill," said Dasce easily. "Still, I enjoy killing beautiful women."

Gersen grinned. Dasce possibly hoped to provoke him. "You may or may not live to regret your sins."

"Who sent you here?" asked Dasce.

"Someone who knew."

Dasce slowly shook his head. "There is only one, and he never sent you."

So much for that ploy, thought Gersen. Dasce would not easily be deceived. Well then. He would take Dasce aboard the ship. The situation was certain to produce some sort of reaction.

Now a new problem. He did not dare leave Robin Rampold alone with Dasce, not even for long enough to fetch the platform. Rampold might kill Dasce. Or Dasce might command Rampold to release him. After seventeen years of degradation, Rampold might be sufficiently under Dasce's influence to obey. And Pallis Atwrode, what of her?

Gersen locked Dasce in the cage. He assisted Rampold into an air-suit and took him back to the platform.

Jets roaring at full power, the over-loaded platform lurched sluggishly around the plateau, blowing up a fan of dust which settled with startling rapidity in the thin atmosphere. Ahead stood the space-ship, minute against the sweep of the vast horizon. Gersen landed close beside the entrance port. Hand-weapon within easy reach, he climbed the accommodation ladder.

Inside, Grendel had watched his approach, had seen the cargo. Grendel could not know what Dasce had told Gersen. He must be taut with indecision. Dasce, who would recognize the ship, might suspect but could not be sure that Grendel was aboard.

The air-lock thudded shut, the pumps throbbed, the inner door swung open. Gersen stepped forward. Kelle, Detteras, Warweave sat at various quarters of the room. They looked at him without friendliness. No one moved.

Gersen unfastened the head-globe. "I'm back."

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"So we see," said Detteras.

"I've been successful," said Gersen. "I've got a captive with me: Hildemar Dasce. A word of warning to you. This man is a brutal murderer. He is desperate. I intend to hold him under rigid conditions. I ask that none of you interfere or have anything to do with this man. The other two persons are a man Dasce has kept penned in a cage for seventeen years, and a young woman whom Dasce recently kidnaped and whose mind has suffered in consequence. She shall use my cabin. I shall keep Dasce in the cargo hold. The other man, Robin Rampold, will no doubt be happy for the use of a settee."

"This voyage becomes stranger by the hour," said Warweave.

Detteras rose impatiently to his feet. "Why do you bring this man Dasce aboard? I'm surprised you haven't killed him."

"Consider me squeamish."

Detteras gave a bark of sour laughter. "Let us proceed. We are anxious to get this trip over as fast as possible."

Gersen sent Rampold into the ship with Pallis Atwrode; then with a winch, he slid the platform with Dasce aboard, into the cargo hold, where he removed Dasce's head-globe. Dasce glared at him wordlessly.

"You may see someone aboard you recognize," said Gersen.

Dasce said nothing. Gersen secured him with exceeding care. At the center of a long cable he made a loop which he knotted and clamped tightly around Dasce's neck. The ends of the cable he made fast at opposite sides of the hold, stretching the cable taut. Dasce was now constricted in the middle of the hold, the cable extending past him to right and left, the ends ten feet out of his reach to either side. Even with hands free Dasce would not work himself loose. Gersen now cut the tapes binding Dasce's arms and legs. Dasce instantly struck out. Gersen dodged aside and clubbed Dasce with the butt of his weapon. Dasce reeled over senseless. Gersen slipped off Dasc's air-suit, searched the pockets of the white pantaloons, finding nothing. He made a final check of the bonds, then returned to the main saloon, bolting the hatch behind him.

Rampold had divested himself of his air-suit and sat quietly in a corner. Detteras and Kelle had done the same for Pallis Atwrode, and had dressed her in spare clothing. Kelle cast a glance of disapprobation toward Gersen. "This is Miss Atwrode, the receptionist at the department. What in the name of heaven is she doing out here?"

"The answer is perfectly sim-

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ple," said Gersen. "I met her the first day I visited the university and asked her out for the evening. For sheer malice, Hildemar Dasce struck me down and kidnaped her. I felt it was my duty to rescue her."

Kelle smiled thinly. "I suppose we can't fault you for this."

Warweave spoke in the driest of voices: "Presumably we will now make for our original destination."

"Yes," grumbled Detteras. "The sooner we put a term to this fantastic voyage the better."

The dark star and its feeble red companion became one with space. In the hold Hildemar Dasce, recovering consciousness, swore a low vile mutter and tested his bonds with insensate ferocity. He tore and twisted at the clamps till the skin peeled from his fingers; he plucked at the metal strands in the cable till his fingernails broke. Then he tried a new procedure. Thrusting against the floor, lunging from side to side, he tried to pull the cable loose from where it was fastened at the walls: first to the right, then to the left. He succeeded only in bruising his neck.

Assured that he was in fact helpless, though hands and feet were free, he relaxed, panting. His mind seethed with emotion.

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How had Gersen located the dark star? No one alive knew the location but himself . . . and Grendel. Dasce reviewed the occasions on which he had circumvented, cheated or failed Grendel and wondered if one of these occasions might not have come home to roost.

In the saloon Gersen sat brooding on a settee. The three men from the university — one of whom was not a man — stood together far forward. There was Kelle: suave, fastidious, compact in physique; Warweave: ectomorphic, saturnine; Detteras: large-bodied, restless, moody. Gersen eyed his suspect, probing his every act, word and gesture for corroboration, for some sign to provide the absolute assurance he needed. Pallis Atwrode sat quietly nearby, lost in reverie. From time to time her face twitched, her fingers clenched into her palms.

There would be no qualms to the killing of Hildemar Dasce.

Robin Rampold stood listlessly at the microfilm library, looking at the index, stroking his long bony chin. He turned, glanced toward Gersen, sidled across the room wolfishly. In a voice so polite as to seem servile he asked, "*He* — is *he* alive?"

"For the moment."

Rampold hesitated, opened his mouth, closed it again. Final-

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ly he asked diffidently, "What do you plan for him?"

"I don't know," said Gersen. "I want to make use of him."

Rampold became very earnest. He spoke in a low voice, as if afraid that the other occupants of the saloon would hear. "Why not put him into my charge? Then you would be relieved of the effort of guarding and tending him."

"No," said Gersen, "I think not."

Rampold's face became even more haggard and desperate. "But — I must."

"You must?"

Rampold nodded. "You cannot understand. For seventeen years he has been—" He could not find words. Finally he said, "He has been the center of my existence. He has been like a personal god. He has provided food and drink and pain. Once he brought me a kitten — a beautiful black kitten. He watched as I touched it, smiling as if benign. That time I thwarted him. I killed the little creature at once, because I knew his plan. He wanted to wait until I came to love it, then *he* would torture it where I could watch... Of course he made me pay."

Gersen drew a deep breath. "He has too much power over you. I can't trust you with him."

Tears began to form in Rampold's eyes. He spoke in a series of disjointed sentences. "It is strange. I feel grief now. What I feel for him I cannot put into words. It goes to an extreme and beyond and becomes almost tenderness. Substances can be so sweet that they taste bitter, so sour that they taste salt. . . Yes, I would care for him with great pains. I would devote the rest of my life to him." He held out his hands. "Give him to me. I have nothing, or I would repay you."

Gersen could only shake his heard. "We will talk of this later."

Rampold nodded heavily, returned across the room. Gersen looked forward to where Detteras, Kelle and Warweave continued a desultory conversation. Apparently they were agreed on a policy of disinterest toward the new passengers. Gersen smiled grimly. He who was Grendel would not care to confront Hildemar Dasce. Dasce's temperament was not a subtle one; he was as likely as not to blurt out some damaging disclosure. Grendel would certainly try for a few quiet words of warning and reassurance, or conceivably an opportunity to discreetly murder Dasce.

The situation was unstable; sooner or later it was bound to collapse into more truthful rela-

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tionships. Gersen toyed with the idea of precipitating the collapse, but decided to bide his time.

He still carried his weapons. The three from the university, apparently assured of his good intentions, had not required that he restore them to the locker. Amazing, thought Gersen. Even now Grendel could have no cause to suspect that Gersen stalked him. He would be less wary than he might be, and using the pretext of curiosity, might well seek to look in on Dasce.

Vigilance, thought Gersen. It occurred to him that Robin Rampold would be a useful ally in this situation. No matter what distortions and sublimations seventeen years had produced, he would be no less alert than Gersen himself . . . in any matters relating to Hildemar Dasce.

Gersen rose to his feet, went aft, through the engine room, into the cargo hold. Dasce, making no pretense of stoic resignation, glared at him. Gersen noted Dasce's bleeding fingers. Putting his projac on a shelf to void the possibility of Dasce wresting it away from him, he stepped close to check Dasce's bonds. Dasce kicked savagely. Gersen hacked him behind the ear with the side of his hand, and Dasce fell back. Gersen assured himself as to the clamps which constricted the cable around Dasce's neck, then moved back, out of Dasce's reach "It seems," said Gersen, "that troubles are catching up with you."

Dasce spat at him.

"Fah! What more can you do to me? Do you think I fear death? I live only out of hate."

"Rampold has asked that I give you into his care."

Dasce sneered. "He fears me until he reeks and crawls. He is soft as honey. It was no longer gratifying to hurt him."

"I wonder how long it will take to make the same sort of man out of you."

Dasce spat once more. Then he said, "Tell me how you found my star."

"I had information."

"From whom?"

"What difference does it make?" said Gersen. He thought to insert an idea into Dasce's mind. "You'll never have the opportunity of paying him off."

Dasce pulled back his mouth in a hideous grin. "Who is aboard this ship?"

Gersen made no reply. Standing back in the shadows, he watched Dasce. He must suspect, to the point of certainty, that Grendel was aboard. Dasce could be no less uncertain than Grendel himself.

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Gersen framed and discarded a half-dozen questions calculated to trick Grendel's name from Dasce. They were either too clumsy or too subtle; they would apprise Dasce that Gersen wanted information, and so put him on his guard.

Dasce tried to wheedle. "Come! As you say, I am helpless, at your mercy. I am interested in learning who betrayed me."

"Who do you think it might be?"

Dasce grinned ingenuously. "I have a number of enemies. For instance, the Sarkoy. Was it he?"

"The Sarkoy is dead."

"Dead!"

"He helped you kidnap the young woman. I poisoned him."

"Fah," spat Dasce. "Women are everywhere. Why become excited? Release me. I have wealth and I will pay you half — if you tell me who betrayed me."

"It was not Suthiro the Sarkoy."

"Tristano? Surely not Tristano. How could he know?"

"When I met Tristano he had little to say."

"Who then?"

Gersen said, "Very well, I'll tell you; why not? An administrator at the Sea Province University gave me the information."

Dasce rubbed his hand over his mouth, looked sidewise at Gersen in suspicion and doubt. "Why should he do so?" he muttered. "I can't understand any of this."

Gersen had hoped to surprise an exclamation from Dasce. He asked, "Do you know whom I refer to?"

But Dasce only looked at him blankly. Gersen picked up his projac, left the hold.

Returning to the saloon he found conditions as before. He signaled Robin Rampold back into the engine room. "You asked that Dasce might be put into your charge."

Rampold eyed him in tremulous excitement. "Yes!"

"I cannot do this, but I need your help in guarding him."

"Of course!"

"Dasce is tricky. You must never enter the cargo hold."

Rampold winced in disappointment.

"Equally important, you must not allow anyone else near the cargo hold. These men are Dasce's enemies. They might kill him."

"No, no!" exclaimed Rampold. "Dasce must not die!"

Gersen had a new thought. Grendel had ordained the death of Pallis Atwrode for fear that unwittingly she might reveal his identity. In her present state she posed no threat; nevertheless she might recover. Grendel might

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well wish to destroy her, if he could do so without risk. Gersen said, "Also, you must guard Pallis Atwrode, and make sure that no one disturbs her."

Rampold was less interested. "I will do what you ask."

XI

From *The Avatar's Apprentice, in Scroll from the Ninth Dimension*:

Intelligence? asked Marmaduke at one of the permitted intervals, as he attended the EMINENCE upon the Parapet. What is intelligence?

Why, responded the EMINENCE, it is no more than a human occupation; an activity which men put their brains to, as a frog kicks his legs to swim; it is a standard which men in their egotism use to measure other and perhaps nobler races, who are thereby dumbfounded.

Do you mean, REVERED GRAY, that no living creature other than man can share the quality of intelligence?

But ha! And why should I not ask, what is LIFE, what is LIVING, but a disease of the primordial slime, a purulence in the original candid mud, which culminates through cycles and degrees, by distillations and sediments, in the human manifestation?

But, REVERED, it is known that other worlds demonstrate this fact of LIFE. I allude to the jewels of Olam, as well as the folk of the Chthonian Bog.

Witling, how have you glanced off the exact stroke of the ESSENCE.

REVERED, I crave your indulgence.

The way along the Parapet is not to the forward-footed.

REVERED GRAY, pray that my direction be defined.

Eight tones of the gong have sounded. Be content for the nonce, and fetch the morning wine.

The filament from Lugo Teehalt's monitor fed impulses into the computer, which digested the information, combined it with the equations describing the ship's previous position and dispatched instructions to the auto-pilot which swerved the ship off and away, on a course roughly parallel to the line between Alphanor and Smade's Planet. Time passed. Life within the ship fell into a routine. Gersen, assisted by Robin Rampold, guarded the cargo hold, though Gersen forbade Rampold entry into the hold itself. Hildemar Dasce for the first few days evinced a brassy jocularity, alternating with earnest threats of vengeance at the hands of an

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agent he refused to identify. "Ask Rampold what he thinks," said Dasce, leering from his bright blue lidless eyes. "Do you want this happening to you?"

"No," said Gersen. "I don't think it's going to happen."

Occasionally Dasce demanded that Gersen answer his questions. "Where are you taking me?" he would ask. "Back to Alphanor?"

"No."

"Where then?"

"You'll see."

"Answer me, or by—" here Dasce swore obscene oaths — "I'll do you worse than you've ever imagined!"

"It's a chance we have to take," said Gersen.

"'We'?" asked Dasce softly. "Who is 'we'?"

"Don't you know?"

"Why doesn't he come in here? Tell him I want to talk to him."

"Any time he wants he can come in."

At that Dasce fell silent. Goad, prod, pry as he might, Gersen never could induce Dasce to utter a name. Nor did any of the three from the university show interest in Dasce.

As for Pallis Atwrode, her detachment, if anything, became more profound. For hours she would sit, looking out at the passing stars. At times she ate, slowly, hesitantly, without hunger; she slept hours on end, curled into as tight a ball as possible. She spoke to no one, and submitted without protest to the ministrations of Gersen and Rampold.

More time passed. The ship traversed new regions, and regions after regions where no man had passed but one: Lugo Teehalt. To all sides hung stars by the thousand and the million: streaming, swarming, flowing, glaring, glittering; shifting silently one across the other, and the other across another still — worlds of infinite variety, populated by who knows whom; each drawing the eye, fixing the imagination, evoking wonder; each world an urge, a temptation, a mystery; each a promise of unseen sights, unknown knowledge, unsensed beauty.

Eventually a warm golden-white star showed dead ahead.

The monitor panel blinked alternately green, red, green, red. The auto-pilot choked down the energy output; the split began to collapse; the ship set up a weird sub-sound as eddies and disturbances and back-drafts of a substance which could only be called space sucked at its fabric.

The split collapsed with a slight shock; the ship slid serenely, like a boat drifting on a pond.

The golden-white sun hung

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close at hand, controlling three planets. One was orange, small and near, a fuming cinder. Another swung in a far orbit, a gloomy dismal world, the color of tears. The third, sparkling green and blue and white, revolved close below the ship.

Gersen, Warweave, Detteras and Kelle, antagonisms temporarily set aside, bent over the macroscope. The world was clearly beautiful, with a thick moist atmosphere, ample oceans, a varied topography.

Gersen was the first to stand away from the screen. The time had come to hone his vigilance to its sharpest edge. Warweave stood back next. "I'm completely satisfied. The planet is nonpareil. Mr. Gersen has not deceived us."

Kelle looked at him in surprise. "You think it unnecessary to land?"

"I do think it unnecessary, but I am willing to land." He moved across the cabin, stood near the shelf to which was affixed Suthiro's switch. Gersen tensed. Is it to be Warweave? But Warweave passed on. Gersen released his pent breath. Of course the time was not yet. To profit from the gas, Grendel must somehow protect himself from its influence.

Kelle said, "I certainly believe that we should land, at least to make biometrics. In spite of its appearance the world may be completely unfriendly."

Detteras said doubtfully, "It's rather awkward, with captives and invalids and passengers. The sooner back to Alphanor the better."

Kelle snapped in a voice as sharp as any Gersen had heard him use, "You talk like a jackass. All this way, merely to turn tail and run home? Obviously we must land, if only to walk out on the planet for five minutes!"

"Yes," said Detteras glumly. "No doubt you're right."

"Very well," said Warweave. "Down we go."

Gersen wordlessly swung the auto-pilot toggle over into the landing program. The horizons extended, the landscape became distinct: green parkland, low rolling hills, a chain of lakes to the north, a range of snow-clad crags to the south. The ship settled to the ground; the roar of exhaled energy ceased. There was now solidity underfoot, utter quiet except for the ticking of the automatic environment analyzer, which presently flashed three green lights: the optimum verdict.

There was a short wait for pressure equalization. Gersen and the three men from the uni-

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versity donned exterior clothing, rubbed allergen-inhibitor on face, hands and neck, adjusted inhalators against bacteria and spores.

Pallis Atwrode looked from the observation ports in innocent wonder. Robin Rampold sidled uneasily along the back bulkhead like a lean old gray rat, making tentative motions, as if he wished to alight but did not dare leave the sure security of the saloon.

Air from outside flooded the boat, smelling fresh, damp, clean. Gersen went to the port, swung it open, made a polite if ironic gesture. "Gentlemen — your planet."

Warweave was the first to step down to the ground, with Detteras close behind, then Kelle. Gersen followed more slowly.

The monitor had brought them to a spot hardly a hundred yards from Lugo Teehalt's landing. Gersen thought the landscape even more entrancing than the photographs had suggested. The air was cool, scented with a vaguely herbacious freshness. Across the valley, beyond a stand of tall dark trees, the hills rose, massive yet gentle, marked by outcrops of worn gray rock, the hollows holding copses of soft foliage. Beyond rose a single great billowing cloud-castle, bright in the noon sunlight.

Across the meadow, on the far side of the river, Gersen saw what appeared to be a growth of flowering plants and knew them to be the dryads. They stood at the edge of the forest, swaying on supple gray limbs, their movements easy and graceful. Magnificent creatures, thought Gersen, beyond a doubt — but somehow they were a — well, a discordant element. A perverse notion, but there it was. On their own planet they seemed out of place! Exotic elements in a scene as dear and beloved as — as what? Earth?

Gersen felt no conscious emotional attachment for Earth. Still, the world most nearly like this was Earth — or, more accurately, those occasional areas of Earth which somehow had evaded the artifices and modifications wrought by generations of man. This world was fresh, natural, unmodified. Except for the dryads — a jarring note — this might be Old Earth, Earth of the Golden Age, the Earth of natural man.

Gersen felt a small exhilarating shock of enlightenment. Here resided the basic charm of the world: its near-identity to the environment in which man had evolved. Old Earth must have known many such smiling valleys. The feel of such landscapes permeated the entire fabric of

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the human psyche. Other worlds of the Oikumene might be pleasant and comfortable, but none were Old Earth; none of them were Home.

For a fact, mused Gersen, here is where I would like to build a cottage, with an old-fashioned garden, an orchard in the meadow, a rowboat tied to the riverbank. Dreams, idle yearning for the unattainable... But dreams and yearning which necessarily must affect every man.

Gersen blinked at the impact of a new thought. Suddenly attentive, he watched the others.

Warweave stood by the riverbank frowning down into the water. Now he turned and shot a suspicious glance toward Gersen.

Kelle, beside a clump of ferns as high as his shoulder, looked first up to the head of the valley with its great white spire of cumulus, then down toward the far open parkland. The forest at either side of the valley formed an aisle, continuing till it melted and blurred into haze.

Detteras paced slowly along the meadow, hands behind his back. Now he bent, scooped up a handful of sod, worked it between his fingers, let the soil sift and fall. He turned to stare at the dryads. Kelle did the same.

The dryads, gliding slowly on supple legs, moved out of the shadows, toward the pool. Their fronds shone blue and magenta, copper-russet, gold-ocher. Intelligent beings?

Gersen turned once more to watch the three men. Kelle scowled faintly. Warweave inspected the dryads with obvious admiration. Detteras suddenly put his hands to his mouth and shrilled an ear-piercing whistle, to which the dryads seemed oblivious.

There was a sound from the ship. Gersen turned to see Pallis Atwrode descending the ladder. She raised her hands in the sunlight, drew a deep breath.

"What a beautiful valley," she murmured. "Kirth, what a beautiful valley." She wandered slowly away, pausing now and then to look around her in delight.

Gersen, on sudden thought, turned and ran back up the ladder into the ship. Rampold — where was Rampold? Gersen hastened back to the cargo hold. Rampold had already entered. Gersen advanced cautiously, listened.

Dasce's voice came gruff, hoarse, full of a detestable exultation. "Rampold, do as I say. you hear me?"

"Yes, Hildemar."

"Go to the bulkhead. Unloose the cable. Hurry now!"

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Gersen moved to where he could look unobserved into the hold. Rampold stood not four feet from Dasce, staring down into the red face.

"Do you hear me? Hurry, or I will cause you to bewail the day you were born."

Rampold laughed softly, quiet ly "Hildemar, I have asked Kirth Gersen for you. I told him I would cherish you like a son, I would feed you the most nutritious foods, the most invigorating drink... I do not think he will give you to me, so I must gulp down just a taste of the joy I have promised myself for seventeen years. I am now about to beat you to death. This is the first opportunity—"

Gersen stepped forward. "Sorry, Rampold, to interrupt."

Rampold uttered an inarticulate cry of utter desolation, turned and ran from the hold. Gersen followed him. In the engine room he made a careful adjustment of his projac, thrust it into a holster, returned to the cargo hold. Dasce bared his teeth like a wild animal.

"Rampold has no patience." He went to the bulkhead and began to unfasten the cable.

"What are you going to do?" Dasce demanded.

"The orders are that you shall be executed."

Dasce stared. "What orders?"

"You fool," said Gersen. "Can't you guess what's happened? I'm taking your old position." One side of the cable fell free. Gersen crossed the room. "Don't move unless you want me to break your leg." He unfastened the other end of the cable. "Now stand up. Walk slowly forward and down the ladder. Don't make a single wrong move or I'll shoot you."

Dasce rose slowly to his feet. Gersen motioned with his projac. "Move."

Dasce said, "Where are we?"

"Never mind where we are. Move."

Dasce slowly turned, and trailing the two long ends of the cable went forward — through the engine room, into the saloon, to the exit port. Here he hesitated, looked back over his shoulder. "Keep going," said Gersen.

Dasce descended the ladder. Gersen, following close, slipped on the trailing cable. He jumped to the ground and fell heavily, flat on his face. Dasce gave a wild raucous cry of exultation, leapt on him, seized the projac, sprang back.

Gersen slowly rose to his feet, backed away.

"Stop there," called Dasce, "Oho, but I have you now." He glanced around. Fifty feet to one

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side stood Warweave and Detteras, and slightly behind them Kelle. Pressed against the hull was Rampold. Dasce flourished the projac. "All of you! Stand together, while I decide what to do. Old Rampold, it's time he was dead. And Gersen, naturally, in the belly." He looked to where the three from the university stood. "And you—" he said to one of the men — "you played me false."

Gersen said, "You won't do yourself much good, Dasce."

"Oho, I won't? I hold the weapon. There's three here who are going to die. You, old Rampold, and Grendel."

"There's only a single charge in the gun. You may get one of us, but the others will get you."

Dasce turned a quick look at the charge indicator. He laughed harshly. "So be it. Who wants to die? Or rather, who do I want to kill?" He looked from face to face. "Old Rampold, I've had my pleasure from him. Gersen. Yes, I'd like to kill you — with a red-hot iron in your ear. And Grendel. You sly dog, you betrayed me. What your game is I don't know. Why you brought me here I don't know — but you're the one I'm going to kill." He raised the weapon, pointed, squeezed the trigger. Energy darted from the gun — but not the blazing blue bolt. It was only a weak pale sizzle. It struck Warweave and knocked him to the ground. Gersen charged Dasce. Instead of fighting, Dasce hurled the weapon at Gersen's head, turned and ran up the valley. Gersen picked up the projac, snapped it open, inserted a fresh power-pack.

He walked slowly forward to where Warweave was picking himself up from the ground. Detteras barked at Gersen, "You must be a moron allowing such a man to take your gun."

Kelle spoke in a puzzled voice, "But why shoot Gyle Warweave? Is he a maniac?"

Gersen said, "I suggest we go back into the ship, where Mr. Warweave can rest. There was only a small charge in the gun, but no doubt it hurt."

Detteras grunted, turned toward the ship. Kelle took Warweave's arm; but Warweave shook him off and lurched up the accommodation ladder, followed by Detteras and Kelle, and finally Gersen.

Gersen asked Warweave, "Are you feeling better now?"

"Yes," said Warweave in a cold voice. "But I agree with Detteras. You displayed the utmost folly."

"I'm not so sure as to that," said Gersen. "I carefully arranged the whole affair."

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Detteras gaped at him stupidly. "Purposely?"

"I shorted out the projac, I arranged that Dasce could seize it, I informed him that there was a single charge left — so that he could verify my own conviction regarding the identity of Grendel."

"Grendel?" Kelle and Detteras stared blankly at Gersen. Warweave watched him narrow-eyed.

"Grendel the Monster. I've watched Mr. Warweave a long time, suspecting that he should more properly be known as Grendel."

"This is lunacy," gasped Detteras. "Are you serious?"

"Certainly I'm serious. It had to be either you, Warweave or Kelle. I picked Warweave."

"Indeed," said Warweave. "May I ask why?"

"Of course. First of all I dismissed Detteras. He is an ugly man. Star Kings are more careful with their physiognomy."

"Star Kings?" blurted Detteras. "Who? Warweave? What nonsense!"

"Detteras likewise is a good eater, while Star Kings eat human food with disgust. As for Mr. Kelle, I also thought him an unlikely candidate. He is short and round — again not the physiognomy characteristic of a Star King."

Warweave's face twisted in a glacial smile. "You imply that a good appearance guarantees depravity of character?"

"No. I imply that Star Kings seldom leave their planet unless they can compete successfully against true men. Now, two other points. Kelle is married and has bred at least one daughter. Secondly, Kelle and Detteras have legitimate careers at the university. You are Honorary Provost and I remember something to the effect that a large endowment brought you the job.

"This is insanity," declared Detteras. "Warweave as Grendel the Monster. And a Star King to boot!"

"It's a fact," said Gersen.

"And what do you propose to do?"

"Kill him."

Detteras stared, then lunged forward, roaring in triumph as he grappled Gersen, only to grunt as Gersen twisted, swung an elbow and struck with the butt of the projac. Detteras reeled back.

"I want the cooperation of you and Mr. Kelle," said Gersen.

"Cooperate with a lunatic? Never!"

"Warweave is frequently absent from the university for long periods. Am I right? And one

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of these periods was only recently. Right?"

Detteras set his jaw. "I'll say nothing about that."

"This is true enough," said Kelle uneasily. He glanced sidewise at Warweave, then back to Gersen. "I assume you have strong reasons for your accusation."

"Certainly."

"I'd like to hear some of these reasons."

"They make a long story. It's enough to say that I tracked Grendel to the Sea Province University and narrowed the possibilities to you three. I suspected Warweave almost from the first, but I never was certain until the three of you stepped out on this planet."

"This is sheer farce," sighed Warweave wearily.

"This planet is like Earth — an Earth that no man alive has ever known; an Earth which hasn't existed for ten thousand years. Kelle and Detteras were entranced. Kelle drank in the view, Detteras reverently felt the soil. Warweave went to look into the water: and Star Kings evolved from amphibious lizards who lived in wet holes. The dryads appeared. Warweave admired them, seemed to consider them ornamental. To Kelle and Detteras—and to myself—they are intruders. Detteras whistled at them, Kelle scowled, for we men don't want fantastic creatures on a world so dear to us... But all this is theorizing. After I managed to capture Hildemar Dasce I went to great lengths to convince him that Grendel was his betrayer. When I gave him the chance he identified Warweave — with the projac."

Warweave shook his head pityingly. "I deny all your allegations." He looked to Kelle. "Do you believe me?"

Kelle pursed his lips. "Confound it, Gyle, I've come to regard Gersen as a competent man. I don't believe him to be either irresponsible or a lunatic."

Warweave turned to Detteras. "Rundle — what of you?"

Detteras rolled up his eyes. "I am a rational man. I can't have blind faith — in you, in Gersen or anyone else. Gersen has made a case. Astonishing as it is, facts seem to bear him out. Can you demonstrate to the contrary?"

Warweave considered. "I believe so." He strolled to the shelf below which Suthiro had installed the switch. The inhalator he had worn outside dangled from his hand. "Yes," said Warweave, "I believe I can make a convincing case for myself." He pressed the inhalator to his face, touched the switch. At once the air pollution alarm sounded: a racuous loud clanging.

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"If you turn back the switch," Gersen called out, "the noise will stop."

Warweave numbly reached below the shelf and reversed the switch.

Gersen turned to Kelle and Detteras. "Warweave is as surprised as you. He thought that the switch controlled the gas reservoirs which you will find under the settees, hence his use of the inhalator. I emptied the tanks and changed the leads to connect the switch to an alarm."

Kelle looked under the settee, brought forth the canister. He looked at Warweave. "Well, Gyle?"

Warweave tossed aside the inhalator, turned his back in disgust.

Detteras suddenly roared. "Warweave! Let's have the truth!"

Warweave spoke over his shoulder. "You've heard the truth, from Gersen."

"You are Grendel?" said Detteras in a hushed voice.

"Yes." Warweave wheeled about, drew himself up to his full height. His black eyes glared back and forth. "And I am a Star King, superior to men!"

"A man has defeated you," said Kelle.

Warweave's eyes burnt even brighter. He turned to consider Gersen. "I am curious. Ever since your encounter with Lugo Teehalt you have sought Grendel. Why?"

"Grendel is one of the Demon Princes. I plan to kill them."

Warweave thought a moment. "You are an ambitious man," he said in a neutral voice. "There are not many like you."

"There were not many survivors of the raid on Mount Pleasant. My grandfather was one. I was another."

"Indeed," said Warweave. "The Mount Pleasant raid. So long ago."

"This is a peculiar voyage," said Kelle, whose attitude had become one of wry detachment. "At least we have achieved our purpose. The planet exists. It is as Mr. Gersen described it, and the money in escrow becomes his property."

"Not until we return to Alphanor," growled Detteras.

Gersen spoke to Warweave. "You have taken great pains to secure this world for yourself. I wonder why."

Warweave shrugged noncommittally.

"A man might want to live here, or build himself a palace," suggested. Gersen. "A Star King wants none of these things."

Warweave said presently, "You make a common mistake. Men are after all quite parochial. You forget that individual dif-

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erences exist among folk other than yourselves. Some perhaps are denied the freedom of their own worlds. They become 'renegade': neither man nor their own kind. The folk of Ghnarumen—" he easily used the name which sounded like a cough — are quite as orderly as the most law-abiding folk of the Oikumene. In short, the career of Grendel is not one which the folk of Ghnarumen would care to emulate. They may be right, they may be wrong. It is my prerogative to organize my own style of life. As you know, the Star Kings are strongly competitive. This world, to men, is beautiful. I find it pleasant enough. I plan to bring here folk of my race, to nurture them on a world more beautiful than Earth, to father a world and a people, superior to both men and the people of Ghnarumen. This was my hope, which you will not understand, for there can be no such understanding between your race and mine."

Detteras said between clenched teeth. "But you took advantage of our liberality to dishonor us. If Gersen doesn't kill you, I will."

"Neither of you will kill Grendel the Star King." Two steps took him to the exit port. Detteras lunged after him, frustrating Gersen's attempt to use his projac. Warweave turned, lashed out with his foot, kicked Detteras in the stomach, jumped to the ground and ran off down the slope.

Gersen stepped to the exit port. He sent a bolt of energy unsuccessfully after the bounding figure, descended the ladder and gave chase.

Warweave reached the meadow. He hesitated at the edge of the river, looked back at Gersen, continued down the valley. Gersen kept to the upper slopes where the ground was hard, and began to gain on Warweave, who had come to a marshy area. Warweave once more went to the river-bank and hesitated. If he plunged in, before he gained the opposite shore Gersen would be upon him. He looked back over his shoulder.

His face was no longer that of a man; Gersen wondered how he could have been fooled, even for an instant. Warweave turned, uttered a cry in a slurred guttural language, went to his knees and disappeared.

Gersen, reaching the spot, found a hole in the river-bank almost two feet across. He bent to peer in, but saw nothing. Detteras and Kelle ran up, panting. "Where is he?"

Gersen pointed to the burrow. "According to Lugo Teehalt,

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large white grubs live under the marsh."

"Hmf," said Detteras. "His ancestors evolved in the swamps in just such holes. He probably couldn't want a better haven."

Kelle said dubiously, "He'll have to come out — to eat."

"I'm not so sure. The Star Kings dislike human food. Men find the Star King diet equally repellent. We cultivate plants and domesticate animals; they do similarly for worms and insects, such things as that. Warweave should do quite well on what he finds underground."

Gersen looked up the valley where Hildemar Dasce had fled. "I've lost them both. I was willing to sacrifice Dasce to get Grendel — but both. . ."

The three stood on the riverbank. A breeze rippled the surface of the water, moved the branchs of the great dark trees which grew at the base of the hills. A tribe of dryads wandering along the opposite shore turned their purple-green eyesmudges on the men.

Gersen said, "Perhaps it's just as bad, leaving them together on this planet, as killing them."

"Worse," said Detteras devoutly. "Worse by far."

They returned slowly to the ship. Pallis Atwrode, sitting on the turf, rose to her feet as Gersen approached. She came over to him, took his arm, smiled up into his face. "Kirth, I like it here, don't you?"

"Yes, Pallis, very much."

"Imagine!" said Pallis. "A pretty house up there on the hill, like old Sir Morton Hodenfroe's house on Blackstone Edge. Wouldn't that be nice, Kirth? I wonder. I wonder. . ."

"First we must return to Alphanor, Pallis. Then we'll talk about coming back."

"Very well, Kirth. . . Do you know, I've had the most horrible dream." She sobbed, clutched at him. He put his arms around her, patted her head and shoulders.

Detteras said gruffly, "Well, Gersen, you've made use of Kelle and myself in a most cavalier fashion. I can't say that I enjoy it, but I can't bring myself to resent it either."

Robin Rampold approached slowly, keeping to the shadow of the ship. "Hildemar ran away," he said mournfully. "Now he will make over the mountains to town and I will never seen him again."

"He can make over the mountains," said Gersen, "but he won't find any towns."

"I have been watching up along the hillside, and through the forest," said Rampold. "I think he is somewhere nearby."

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"Very likely," said Gersen.

"It is distressing," said Rampold. "It is enough to sadden a man."

Gersen laughed. "You would prefer to be back in the cage?"

"No, of course not. But then I had my dreams of what I would do when I won free. Seventeen years of hopes and dreams! But now I am free and Hildemar is beyond my reach." He moved disconsolately away.

After a pause Kelle said, "As a scientist I find this planet a place of fascination. As a man I find it entrancing. As Kagge Kelle, erstwhile colleague of Gyle Warweave — I find it extremely depressing. I am prepared to leave at any time."

"Yes," said Detteras in a gruff voice. "Why not?"

Gersen looked up the valley to where Hildemar Dasce, wearing only soiled white pantaloons, lurked in the forest like a raging desperate beast. He looked down the valley, far down over the hazy plain, then back to the swampy meadow, under which crawled Grendel the Monster. He looked down into the face of Pallis Atwrode. She was watching him. "Was it real, Kirth? What happened?"

"Yes. But it's all over."

"I've been..." She hesitated, frowned. "I don't remember too much."

"Just as well."

"Look, Kirth, what are those beautiful creatures?"

"Dryads."

"What are they doing?"

"I don't know. Looking for something to eat, I suppose. Lugo Teehalt says they suck up nourishment from big grubs which burrow under the meadow. Or perhaps they lay eggs in the soil."

The dryads, wandering up the shore, flourished their gorgeous fronds, swaying slowly like branches in the wind. On the swamp they moved more slowly, a step at a time. One of them stopped, stood stock-still. Under its foot showed a glint of white, as the concealed proboscis plunged down into the soft ground. A few seconds passed. The ground heaved, erupted: the dryad toppled over backward.

Up from a crater staggered Warweave, the proboscis still thrust through his back. His face was stained with dirt, his eyes started from his head; from his mouth issued a series of appalling cries. He shook himself, fell to his knees, rolled over, disengaged himself from the fluttering dryad, jumped erect, ran crazily up the hillside. His steps flagged.

He fell to his knees, clutched at the ground, kicked and lay still.

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Gyle Warweave was buried on the hillside. The group returned to the ship. Robin Rampold now diffidently approached Gersen. "I have made up my mind to stay here."

In one part of his brain Gersen was shocked and astonished. In another part there was only confirmation of a previous expectation. "So," said Gersen heavily, "you expect to live on this planet with Hildemar Dasce."

"Yes."

"Do you know what will happen? He will make you his slave. Or he will kill you for the food which I shall be bound to leave you."

Rampold's face was bleak and drawn. "It may be as you say. But I cannot leave Hildemar Dasce."

"Think," said Gersen. "You will be here alone. He will be more savage than ever before."

"I hope that you will leave me certain articles. A weapon, a shovel, a few tools to build a shelter, some food."

"And what will you do when the food runs out?"

"I will look for natural food. Seeds, fish, nuts, roots. These may be poisonous, but I will test them carefully. And what else is left for me?"

Gersen shook his head. "Far better that you return with us to Alphanor. Hildemar Dasce will take senseless but terrible vengeance on you."

Robin Rampold said, "It is a chance I must take."

"As you wish."

The ship lifted from the meadow, leaving Rampold standing beside his meager stack of supplies.

The horizons spread out. The planet became a green and blue ball and fell astern. Gersen turned to Kelle and Detteras. "Well, gentlemen, you have visited Teehalt's planet."

"Yes," said Kelle tonelessly. "By a roundabout method you have fulfilled the terms of your agreement with us, the money is yours."

Gersen shook his head. "I don't want the money. I suggest that we keep the existence of this planet secret, to preserve it from what could only be desecration."

"Very well," said Kelle. "I'm agreed."

"I agree," said Detteras, "provided that I may return another time, under more relaxing conditions."

"This is what I wish to do myself," said Gersen.

"Can we build a house, Kirth?" asked Pallis Atwrode. "A pretty little house with steep gables?"

"If you like."

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A year later Kirth Gersen returned alone to Teehalt's planet in his old Model 9B spaceboat.

Hanging in space he examined the valley by macroscope, but discovered no signs of life. There was now a projac on the planet and it might well be in the hands of Hildemar Dasce. He waited till nightfall and landed the boat on a shelf in the mountains above the river valley.

The long quiet night came to an end. At dawn Gersen started down the valley, keeping always to the shelter of the trees.

From far off he heard the sound of an axe. With great care he approached the sound.

On the edge of the forest Robin Rampold chopped at a fallen tree. Gersen stealthily moved closer. Rampold's face had filled out. He looked bronzed and strong and fit. Gersen called his name. Rampold looked up, startled, searching the dark shadows. "Who is there?"

"Kirth Gersen."

"Come forth, come forth. No need to steal up so furtively."

Gersen moved to the edge of the forest, looked carefully all around. "I feared I might find Hildemar Dasce."

"Ah," said Rampold. "No need to worry about Hildemar."

"He is dead?"

"No. He is quite alive, in a little pen I built for him. With your permission, I will not take you to see him, as the pen is in a private spot, well hidden from any who might visit the planet."

"I see," said Gersen. "You defeated Dasce then."

"Of course. Did you ever doubt it? I have much more resource than Dasce. I dug a pit during the night, built a deadfall. In the morning Hildemar Dasce swaggered forth, hoping to confiscate my stores. He fell into it, and I took him captive. Already he has become a changed man." He looked closely into Gersen's face. "You do not approve?"

Gersen shrugged. "I came to take you back to the Oikumene."

"No," said Rampold. "Never fear for me. I will live out my days here, with Hildemar Dasce. It is a beautiful planet. I have found sufficient food to maintain us, and daily I demonstrate to Hildemar Dasce the tricks and conceits he taught me long ago."

They wandered down the valley to the previous landing place. "The life-cycle here is strange," said Rampold. "Each form changes into another, endlessly. Only the trees are permanent."

"So I learned from the man who first found the planet."

"Come, I'll show you Warweave's grave." Rampold led the way up the slope, to a copse of slender white-timbered trees. To

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the side grew a seedling, rather different from the rest. The trunk was veined with purple, the leaves were dark-green and leathery. Rampold pointed. "There rests Gyle Warweave."

Gersen looked a moment, then turned away. He gazed up and down the valley. It was as beautiful and placid and quiet as before. "Well, then," said Gersen. "I will once more depart. I may never return. Are you sure you wish to stay?"

"Absolutely." Rampold looked up at the sun. "But I am late. Hildemar will be expecting me. A pity to disappoint him. I will bid you farewell now." He bowed and departed, crossing the valley and disappearing into the forest.

Gersen once more looked up and down the valley. The world was no longer innocent; it had known evil. A sense of tarnish lay across the panorama. Gersen sighed, turned and stood looking down at what had become Gyle Warweave's grave.

He bent, seized the seedling, pulled it from the soil, broke it, cast it aside. Then he turned and walked up the valley toward his space-boat.

—JACK VANCE

★ ★ ★ ★ ★

FORECAST

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